

Sonder

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Author: CobalticArkangel

Authorlink: <https://archiveofourown.org/users/CobalticArkangel>

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Summary: N. The realization that each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own.

***Chapter 1*: Chapter 1**

"Emi...lia..."

A strangled voice called out distantly. It came like a mumble, wrenched and pained but better than the world she'd be leaving behind. One of frost and frozen memories. One she'd hopefully - no, unarguably - return to, one day soon, when she could amend her costly mistake.

But not today. Purple eyes blinked, shimmering in a room of hued blue. Dull walls and vibrantly sharp crystals called to the corners of her vision, but she paid them no heed.

She woke to her friend, realized where she lay, and forced her rattled limbs onto the stone for purchase. Thankfully, she still had enough strength to push herself up to sit. Her numbed leg rested under her weight, and even as the girl yearned to nurse warmth into the aching limb questions pervaded her addling mind.

"Subaru." She tested the word. It came slowly, from the bottom of a parched throat. "Where..."

Realization struck like a Wolgarm in the night, fangs poised over her neck. She moved to speak, terrified by the sensation it gave: as if the vicious jaw had clamped her in a warning vice. And that another word promised pained, nerve-racking reprisal.

She fought through the fear regardless. Met it head on. "Wait, I was just..."

Frozen statues. Men, women, children, pets. Loved ones and friends and merchants and traders and so much she couldn't understand. Standing in the frigid snow, backs ramrod straight or stooped with age, but unchanging even as all the snowflakes fell and slowly buried them in the col-

Her heart skipped and froze in... it was something abject. Pointed and lancing through her chest worse than any blade. Breath hitched in quickened, desperate breaths.

It took a moment for the half-elf to realize it wasn't hers.

"Subaru?"

His teeth began to chatter. It was unlike him.

"Why..." She laid a hand on his cheek, cupping it. It trembled in her grasp - he was fidgeting. Not away from her, certainly?

She renewed the gesture with all the comfort she could muster, grateful to find more of the precious sentiment in herself than she'd expected to remain after... that.

It always helped make him feel better before. Her fingers moved to stroke the side of his head gently.

He worked too hard. He worried too much. It was sweet of him. But there was no sense in him hurting. She was fine. She would be.

Emilia mustered the brightest smile she could for his sake - it was likely a bit duller than usual, against the exhaustion that seemed to dredge at her core, but she couldn't be selfish. He'd cry from the relief. Pour out every ounce of his pain in the embittered tears that fell - she'd remembered them soaking into the lap of her dress the last time it had happened. And everything would be better, like it always did. It had always worked before.

Not now.

His eyes widened. Not in the teasing amazement - he liked to tease her a good deal about the oddest things, hidden under alleged praise - she'd long grown accustomed to. Which always led to mirthful laughter she'd always chosen to meet with puffed cheeks and her own curious indignation.

No. It was the same face worn by those frozen statues, regardless of who they were or who they ought to be: fear.

Naked, vulnerable, and afflicted. Staring worriedly in the eyes as if she'd caused it.

Her mouth parted in shock. Her eyes widened in kind, at an utter loss with her attempts at consolation.

A sob ruptured from her friend. Wet and gurgling. Then another. His eyes shunted into a squint. Then the tears began to fall.

The cries wracked at his body hideously - it didn't suit him at all. He'd always been strong. Even when he claimed he hadn't been. He'd never yielded even as he worked himself beyond the bone at the mansion to prove something no one asked of him. Simply rested.

Truth be told, she'd been half-tempted to join him. To simply weep and wail at their shared pain in each other's grasp.

He might have forgiven her for it. No, he definitely would. He was kind like that.

But she couldn't claim the same for herself. Not for all the times he'd been strong when she'd been weak. It would have been unacceptable.

So Emilia buried the pain that gnawed - somewhere in a deep recess in her mind where it could only nibble at her attention impotently - and set to the most important task. Her right hand reached for the other side of his face, and tenderly directed his fractured gaze towards her own. More wails forced their way out of his throat.

"It's all right. It's all right, Subaru." She promised. It would be.

She pulled, nudging him towards herself permissively. He needed no prompting after that, and buried his grief-stricken face into her shoulder with a thud. Warm, damp tears clung and seeped into the fabric, with some instead trailing off slivers of her bared shoulders. "I'm right here, see?"

He kept crying. Distressed and pitiful and unbecoming of the person he was: someone dear to her heart. She pulled him tighter, and he reciprocated.

"I'm right here."

"So... you were supposed to help Emilia, but you only caused trouble for her." Ram began repeating with her usual tact. Which was to say none whatsoever. Otto eyed her carefully, eyes pitying his friend but equally invested in not becoming the next target of the maid's ire. Even Garfiel, usually smitten by the pink-haired girl in his own brash way, seemed uncomfortable with her bludgeoning bluntness. "Why are you even alive?"

It was a joke. It must be a joke. It had to be, right? Probably. Emilia chose to play along - hopefully the others would get it too, and then maybe they could all just laugh it off like... friends, really. They were friends now. This had to be it.

She smiled bashfully at her weepy savior, who'd taken to wearing a shamed visage. Not much better, but a marked improvement over when he'd found her.

"After you came in hoping to help me, it's really a shame you got so worried you started crying." She joked, hoping to lift their spirits.

"Emilia, you're gonna make me cry again." This again. Where he thought being seen in pain was deplorable. Maybe she could rectify him.

"But you're always the one helping me." She'd just closed her eyes until then, only opening them to join her next point. "So a part of me is relieved that you let me see this weaker side of yours."

She flashed him a soft, assuaging smile to let him know she wouldn't hold it against him. As if she ever could over something so special, as sad as that sounded. He'd trusted her with it, and doing anything less than respect it would be more than horrible on her part.

He paused, briefly. Thoughts went through his mind, that much was certain - his eyes always darted around when he was thinking about something new. At least, they always did when she'd seen them. This time they widened and swept up with his head as if taken aback, sweeping down and sideways to stare at the ground dejectedly.

"I'd rather not let you see that side of me, though." His eyes swept to the side, glanced at her, then turned back as if ashamed.

What was there to be ashamed of? Subaru was confusing like that sometimes, but the need for an answer burned.

"Huh? Why not?"

"Because I only want you to see the part of me that's trying to look good." He'd finally turned to look at her, though the bubbling enthusiasm she'd known him to possess looked to have trickled away from him. "I want you to forget that I'm actually a weak, helpless loser."

Emilia pouted. If every weak, helpless loser could do this much for her sake, she'd have chosen them over every knight in the kingdom. And it was wrong to look down on yourself, wrong to lie about yourself, and he was doing both without batting an eye. She made her displeasure clear.

"Hey! I'm not going to hate you just because you showed me a moment of weakness!"

It just meant he trusted her. Hopefully as much as she trusted him. Maybe he could learn to rely on her as much as she did in turn.

"Hah." Ram's cutting voice interrupted, laced with its usual acerbic wit. "That pride isn't very convincing after you've just bawled your eyes out."

Probably a joke. But very badly timed - especially when he almost seemed contemplative of the idea! Grr...

The shock of interruption, mild as it had been, was disorienting. All Emilia could do was stare at the maid, mouth agape and tongue searching for words that refused to form.

It was Subaru who filled the abrupt silence. "Do you have to rain on my parade every single time?!"

That was just their way. Emilia knew better than to intrude on their... odd interactions.

Otto, however, had yet to be truly acquainted with the maid. Else, he wouldn't have chosen his next words so poorly.

"Now, now." He assured, and a small part of Emilia that just knew what he'd planned to say urged her to warn him off the futile gesture. It was a shame her voice failed her yet again right then and there. "Ram's attitude is just how she shows she's worried."

Subaru knew that. He'd told her even... what was it called? Tsun... something. Sugar and ice, alternatively, though she wasn't very partial to the term used she could see how it fit. Ram did care, in her strange and often questionable ways. While the pink-haired maid was always courteous to her, Emilia always suspected she'd taken to him more despite her seniority. Ram might have seen him as a friend, or confidant even, Or an exclusive target of the mounting ire she couldn't really direct at anyone else in the household.

Perhaps all three at once.

Getting Ram to admit that would have been more challenging than convincing all the other Camps to bow out of the Royal Election.

Her suspicions were reaffirmed when Ram shot their green-garbed friend what Emilia imagined to be a rather convincing threat through her single exposed eye. He whimpered rather indignantly, which everyone knew best to ignore. She did spot her friend smiling at the curious display, which was wonderful for the short while it lasted.

Then silence fell between the five of them. Otto had calmed, Ram had lost interest - as she oft did - and Emilia watched.

Garfiel's gaze was met with pulsing brown eyes that began to wilt like a sad puppy's.

The blond boy's eyes drooped, with his mouth forming a snaggle smile that emphasized his scar. "Yeah, I wasn't sure what was going to happen for a minute, but I'm glad you made it back alright."

Her friend looked confused at the concern. A single green eye peeked open in what felt like the opposite of a wink. "I guess a single breeze won't knock the gafgalon fruit off the tree, and that ain't nothing to sneeze at!" It ended with a pitched, buzzing laugh that reminded her just how young he really was.

He wasn't wrong. Gafgalon trees were quite sturdy, and the fruits clung onto the leafy branches so tightly they might have even given Subaru competition on stubbornness.

She laughed at her own in-joke. Privately, within the confines of her own mind. It wouldn't do to act stranger than she

already was.

A playful smack rocked his shoulder, forcing a staggered "Ow." from her knight. He'd seemed more confused than anything else.

"Wait... that's it?"

Of course. What else was there?

"Huh?" Garfiel leaned forward questioningly. Subaru in turn leaned back, uncertain and worrying.

"N-Nothing. Thanks for the concern." He said, though it sounded confusingly like an apology.

"Garf." Ram interrupted, eye shut in thought. He turned to face her, paying rapt attention. It was actually rather adorable how smitten he was with the fair maid, despite the gruff, boisterous attitude he wore all the time. "I believe we've responsibilities to attend to. Let Emilia rest for the next trial, and Barusu more time to cry over his failed attempt to be a man. Look, you can clearly see he still needs it."

She pointed an accusing finger that might have poked his eye out if he'd leaned forward. Her lone eye drifted to meet Emilia's purple, telling yet silent. Emilia smiled at the concealed concern, and Ram broke eye contact in what she'd imagined to have been indignance - or the closest thing to it the maid could outwardly wear.

She did care. That much was obvious - even if only to her alone.

"Cruel..." Subaru mumbled, fixed in a downcast stare at the ground. Otto seemed to be trying to console him. Or distract him - it was really hard to tell with him. Garfiel seemed conflicted with how to proceed: he didn't want to upset Ram, but likely felt some sympathy at his emasculation. He seemed to have settled on a compromise, taking a mediating step a fair distance between the two, crossing his arms and maintaining his silence.

A dark, pink eye leapt into her field of vision, falling on the half elf meaningfully as Otto's attempts at commiseration morphed into bickering.

Emilia tilted her head playfully, promising her own silence. Ram's secret would be safe with her.

The critical eye flitted back, seemingly finding the forestry more interesting than the four before her.

She suppressed a giggle at the standoffish consideration Ram insisted on. Tried to. Failed - thankfully, the other three failed to notice. Far too engrossed in their squabbles... it truly was their squabble now: even Garfiel had broken his neutrality on the matter, loudly arguing with a relieved Subaru and cowed Otto.

Ram didn't. She'd begun to suspect the maid would be very cross with her for the next coming days.

"Hmph."

Sleep wouldn't come, no matter how tightly she shut her eyes. The bed rocked with distracting spasms, as her body fought to think itself to exhaustion.

She'd helped Subaru, yes. With the pain that seemed to haunt him, despite her own confusing concerns. A frosted world she couldn't understand or explain. The broken tears that brimmed from her eyes, promising to do so much more. She'd half-hoped her own focus on guiding him through would stop her from thinking about the inexplicable fear that clawed into her core - it was shamefully selfish, she knew.

Emilia had learned better than to hope for that now, as the pains she'd disregarded for another reared their misshapen head and demanded indivisible attention. She coiled her limbs onto the simple pillow tighter and tighter until the exertion started to hurt her arms and legs.

A walk might do her good. The moon was always distractingly beautiful, and if she was very lucky it would be cloudless tonight.

The cold came in harsh, sweeping winds that kept the sleeves of her nightgown billowing. She crossed her arms over her chest, found it awkward to walk like that, and subsequently settled on grasping the excess fabric with her hands, carefully tugging them taut so as not to stretch them.

Despite the chilling surroundings, a sheen of sweat clung to her porcelain skin. She hoped it would clear off and dry soon - sweat did such terrible things to white. Still, the night came glacially, and she pulled the borrowed blanket she brought closely to herself.

A quiet stroll in the night was always a pleasant endeavor, with nothing but the accompaniment of Puck and the wilderness chirping its own ever-changing tune. Tonight it was leaves rustling about, branches rocking like a crib, faintly humming in harmony with the vibrant insects of the land.

She fingered the pendant that housed her silent friend, enjoying the smooth contours of the gem with the flat of her fingers but much preferring the playful musings of the companion that rested beneath. Puck wasn't gone. Was he?

No. She'd have known. Contracts didn't work like that. And neither did Puck.

He would be back, say something about his visit being delayed by whatever it was slowed down spirits - refusing to elaborate as usual. He would try to play off his disappearance as a mean spirited joke to keep her from worrying. She'd pout and puff her cheeks, which would lead to an apology from him and a request for belly rubs, which she would abide by even during the rare times he managed to annoy her (as fathers often do to their children).

But he wasn't back now. And she'd no clue if - no, when. When. - her cherished companion would return to her. She needed him, more than ever.

The jewel rested in her grasp, fingers wrapped around it like a lifeline. Emilia worked to slacken her grip - not that she could have crushed the crystal, of course. But she might chip it, or hurt herself, and Puck would be upset and worried about her for acting like that. The best thing she could do was stay as the same person he'd left behind and keep his home very much the same way.

A drifting spirit wandered into view, tiny and excited. It hurtled in the air and danced around her like the spectacle it truly was.

She'd never taken it for granted. Few could see the lovely sight. Fewer still could replicate it. Even fewer could appreciate it with the same childish glee.

It spoke to her, in the way spirits did. The answer came not in words nor sounds nor scenes, and there was no way to describe it to the majority who hadn't been granted the same gift. Instead, the message came in meaning: implicit, understood, and irrefutable. She wasn't alone, and needn't a name nor a face to know who was with her.

"Subaru?" An alarmed voice yelped in confirmation. "What are you doing out here?"

'Hey... it's a real shock when you act super-duper spooked like that.'" She wasn't sure she'd ever seen it before. Not in her lifetime. He'd always been determined or exhausted, but never surprised no matter what came next.

"Super-duper? Who says that in this day and age?" He refuted with his usual tactless charm - the one she'd thought he'd left behind in the carriage a scant few days ago.

It was blessed relief to be proven wrong. Her windburned lips curled slightly. "I guess I was worried for nothing."

Subaru raised his hands placatingly. His eyes followed in the same vein. "I wasn't doing anything worth worrying about. Everything's fine."

Of course. He was with her. Along with Ram and Otto and Garfiel and the villagers and even Rosewaal. And soon enough, so would Puck. Everyone that mattered to her was there, or they would be soon enough. And nothing could ever hope to challenge that. They'd have to contend with her knight, after all.

She blinked something away. It wasn't important, unlike the one before her.

"You almost look like a fairy, Emilia."

And just like that, the warmth abated into annoyance. For all his strengths, Subaru could be absolutely terrible sometimes.

"Hey! You shouldn't say mean things like that about someone! Even I can get angry, you know." Emilia protested, falling into an affronted pout.

She'd thought he seemed young, and his actions at times made his protests to his alleged age difficult to believe.

He looked eleven, and with the name-calling sometimes he even acted it too!

"It was supposed to be a compliment!" He argued, as if it made sense. Acting his true age, she suspected.

She met his gaze with renewed skepticism, pointing out the obvious yet again. He balked under her scrutiny.

"Fairies are a type of evil spirit, aren't they?" Anyone growing up in the world knew that. Even she did, for heaven's sake! "You won't fool me into thinking that's a compliment!"

"Another pick-up line foiled by the cultural barrier..." He lamented, for lack of a better word. Yet another strange habit of his - random, meaningless words. They were quite far from any grocer and there was no line in the vicinity, thank you very much!

And what cultural barrier? It was common sense everyone taught children - even the ones that weren't theirs to begin with. Auntie Fortuna and Uncle Geuse made sure she knew better than to call people fairies!

Next he'd be calling her a witch, claiming it some variant of misaimed praise. She could stomach the idea of those vulgar words coming from others, but not her knight. The thought was quite upsetting, and she hoped he wouldn't repeat that disappointing choice.

"Anyway, what're you doing waling around here so late at night?" He deflected, taking a seat on a large, rounded stone. Subaru patted a hand by the side of it, which she obliged. "If Puck were here, he'd tell you that's bad for your skin."

Which... was true. Puck would have lambasted her for being so careless about her self, then demanded she return somewhere warm and sheltered, insistent that she stroke his fur as punishment for her reckless behavior. The punishment might have been for the show, but the disappointment would last.

"I guess, um... I have no excuse for that." She admitted. "I just haven't been able to sleep since then, so I went for a walk to feel the night breeze for a bit."

"Because you're worried about the trial?" He asked, lilted tone concerned.

"It's not that." She assured, shutting her eyes. The images of a barren and bitter wasteland assailed her mind, with all the frozen faces beneath the chipped ice and accumulating snow. "No... maybe it is. But I'm not entirely sure what it is myself."

It was difficult to do so. The dream made no sense. But didn't need to make sense to hurt, and it didn't need any reason to stop hurting.

"I was walking around hoping to figure it out... I guess." She said weakly. She'd intended so, only to lapse and bemoan her own circumstances. It was unseemly, and pretending it was anything but bothered her more than confessing her own weakness.

"I really wish..." She fought for the next words, hoping her voice didn't crack and promptly disappointing herself. "Puck was here."

The night seemed to hush in response, going beyond mere unbroken wordlessness for a tentative moment.

"I guess, no matter where I go, I'll always be a pinch-hitter." The voice beside her spoke, tone unbothered yet steeped in resignation.

"Huh?"

What did that even mean?

Her companion seemed to sense the confusion - there was plenty to go around. Subaru roused from her side, turning to face her with an expression unreadable to her

"You're amazing, Emilia." He began suddenly, which only served to disorient her more. "No one would blame you for wanting to run away from this. But you face it head-on without backing down. I respect that."

She searched his face for any hint of humor - a quirk in his lips, anything really to show he was messing about, but found nothing of the sort. Pointedly earnest to a fault. Uncaring of how embarrassing it was to hear such faith. That

made one of them.

"Wh-What brought this on all of a sudden?" She asked, hoping he didn't catch her voice faltering.

"It's not sudden." Naught but brimming assurance in his voice. His hands stretched to his sides, falling at rest quickly thereafter. "I've always thought that. I just couldn't say it until now.

"Subaru..." Words lacked, and it would have been a disservice to attempt so. She wished, if only for the moment, to be like the spirits that roved around her, imbibing and sharing meaning without fail.

"I don't know how much help I can be to you, but I'll say what I feel out loud.

He always had. It was precious and priceless and deeply treasured.

"You're gonna be fine, Emilia. I know you'll get it done." He promised, and she believed despite everything because it was him saying such. "I'm on your side."

She'd heard it before, time and time again, the same promise passing from his lip

It felt just as brilliant as the first time he'd said so. It always did, without fail.

And just as startling. Her mouth parted in surprise, yielding to heartfelt recognition with a gracious smile. "Yes. Thank you."

He returned the gesture with his own, crooked and honest. It lacked the playful ridicule she often saw. Or maybe it hadn't been there to begin with.

"Really, you've given me so much courage." From her stolen insignia to the whale and perhaps amidst the very world itself.

"You've given me so much more." He replied.

It felt like a lie. What had she done for him that hadn't paled in comparison to the strength he'd shared.

It simply meant Emilia needed to try harder, succeed brilliantly. Start with the trial, follow it wherever it may led.

The villagers freed... along with the trapped demi-humans: the ones just like her... it would be a splendid start.

Emilia,

~~I'm going back to Roswaal's mansion to take care of something.~~

~~It's something I can't tell Ram, Roswaal, or the villagers about.~~

~~So you don't need to worry about anything.~~

~~I'll be back as soon as I'm done.~~

He was gone. Her knight was gone. Subaru was gone.

Morning came brightly until the little color in her pale figure drained at the news.

She'd panicked. Wandered aimlessly amidst the trapped villagers, going from person to person to person in a frantic daze on the chance they might know where he'd gone.

Subaru liked the wilderness. He'd always boasted about his enjoyment of such venues, she'd remembered. Perhaps he'd have enjoyed a cool night in the expanse of forestry...

Ram shook the notion off, citing his lack of capability at first. Moving on to enunciate the stupidity of such an act, and how "Barusu" would not go to such extremes in senseless decisions for mere curiosity. She could see it in her dark pink eyes - the same worried tint in her gaze, only sheathed under layers upon layers of pragmatic purpose. She'd asked to be excused to tend to Roswaal's injured state, though it was more than clear the maid would have proceeded irregardless of her input.

She'd chosen to follow the girl, much to the oni's ire but there simply wasn't time to risk his safety over politeness.

"Gone, really? Truly, truly?" The words never lost the playful lilt that his timbre maintained, though she could see her benefactor's eyes transfixed in deep thought.

"Taken, Rosewaal." She explained, keeping the fear from her voice. Which left the tension that coiled it taut like a ribbon, but he thankfully ignored her weakness.

"What a curious development. Unexpected indeed. Forgive my lack of awareness, dear, but what led you to believe our dear Subaru was abducted?"

Because... because he wouldn't leave! Not like that. Not after everything he said - everything he always had. He was on her side. The only way he'd have left if he'd been dragged away from it, fighting all the way. And if he was fighting, she couldn't let him keep struggling. She owed him that much and more.

"I see, I see. You two indeed share a... shall-we-say unique bond. And truly, truly, I respect that." He articulated, drawing out the syllables at a painfully slow pace. "But I would like to digress: you claim he was taken - I don't doubt your stance on the matter. I won't, if you may kindly provide some semblance of proof for us to proceed. It's very important we get the facts straight before getting carried away - who knows what could happen here if we do that..."

It came as a warning. It was her own thoughts that chided her impulsiveness.

"I... I have nothing of the sort." She confessed, before proceeding. "But-But! He wouldn't leave here. He wouldn't leave anyone here. Not the villagers, nor Otto, nor Ram, nor..."

"Yourself?" Roswaal supplied, a thin smile lacking cheer rested on his face.

"H-He promised." It came weakly, pathetically. Emilia dropped the flawed approach she'd opened with.

"Perhaps not. He's quite smitten with you, after all. And rather fond of every soul from the village and mansion. Myself excluded, of course. I can hardly fathom why that is..."

She nodded along.

"Emilia, dear... you've a trial to overcome. For everyone's sake - Subaru included." It was difficult to argue the point, as much as she yearned to.

"You're the only one who can do so - without, well.... this..." He pointed at his own bandaged figure. Whatever it was that led to such expansive treatment was something she hoped never to see. "Even if it gets a little tiring or difficult. The mind is far stronger than the body, after all."

Still... it was upsetting, and a good deal of her was more than sorely tempted to forego the procedure entirely. For the time being, of course.

It must have shown on her face - it did so on Roswaal's as well, a disappointed smirk curling the contours of his cheeks.

"Emilia, dear... you've but a single pair of eyes and ears. You are far, far more valuable within that temple, but everyone one else in the sanctuary could easily, easily provide the same scrutiny you can in the search. Likely moreso - your fingers have been trembling through our conversation."

She hadn't noticed. Emilia balled the uncooperative hand into a shaking fist instead. She was uncertain if it had been an improvement.

"Try holding onto something instead. Ram, dear?" The maid obliged with a nod, producing an empty cup and guiding it into her shaking grasp.

"It'll pass soon, most assuredly." He said, though it sounded absurd. "But you've my word we'll endeavor to search for him. In fact, Ram?"

His attendant about faced, expectant of new instructions. "I'm sure I can manage for a few hours. Kindly guide our darling Emilia to the trial area per usual, then search for our sole butler's whereabouts from the whispers of the townsfolk."

Ram's shoulders tensed. "But Rosewaal, you are unwell. It would be remiss of me to leave you so vulnerable."

He waved her concerns off casually and quite literally. "True enough, yes. This does hurt quite a bit, but I can assure you I'm not that vulnerable. I can manage a day without your tending, especially when that's all I have to put up with to learn about our dear friend's whereabouts."

"Understood. Please be well, Sir."

"Do be discreet, however." He warned, face turning strangely somber. "Restrict your inquiries to fellow demi humans. Avoid informing the villagers at all cost - I sincerely, sincerely doubt any of their number have the means nor motivation to harm Subaru. And their cooperation with our... shall we say captors... miiiight be compromised, which would only compound an already challenging issue." Ram bowed her head in understanding, only to be interrupted.

"I've... I'm sorry..."

Her carelessness paved the way for yet another avoidable concern.

"I... didn't know better. I a-asked them first. Because they knew him best. Where he might go and such. I asked them before I asked Ram."

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

Roswaal attempted to shrug, grimacing painfully as something he hadn't meant to move did so. Ram moved to aid him, only for her efforts to be stifled by a bandaged hand refusing the comfort. "It's fine, I'm fine."

Her purple eyes fell heavy on her boots, ashamed of her own detrimental negligence.

"I suppose that can't be helped." Roswaal sighed lazily, more inconvenienced. "Anyone in your situation would have done the same - Subaru would have, for certain. We'll do what we can, certainly. Perhaps this might even be a boon - if he truly has been taken, as you say. More hands to scour the area. Invested ones at that."

Emilia maintained her silence.

"Please, dear... everyone needs you for the trials. You're the only one who can do it right now. Truly, you can certainly try at the least. Would you kindly? For his sake?"

Yes.

"Wonderful. Ram, if you would?"

Ice and snow and frozen screams trapped in moments. More confusing things that hurt and hurt and hurt and hurt.

She'd folded into herself like a... like a child. Knees tucked to her chest and sleeved arms wound about her thighs. Alone this time.

No one to be comforted by. No one to comfort. Just frigid stone that leached the little warmth from her body and a mind's worth of agony. She'd forced herself to her feet and slowly walked back outside.

Time had passed when she'd emerged. The sun hadn't been there earlier. It was a bit more yellowish then, and it peeked past the tree rather than above it last she saw.

Three familiar faces met her by the stairs, and her ungrateful mind fixated only on the sole one missing from the ensemble.

"Lady Emilia." Otto greeted, bowing at her as if she were already royalty.

"Miss Emilia." Ram laconically noted, curt and focused on her task at hand presumably.

Garfiel merely grunted, though it seemed amiably enough.

"How did the trial proceed?" The maid asked out of formality more than anything, to be disappointed a second time.

Emilia shook her head, mind still reeling from the plaguing sights.

"I feared as much." It came with gentle dejection that hurt more than anger. "Garf. Kindly tend to the villagers needs for the time being. I believe they are due for luncheon soon. Anything Garf needs you to aid him with, I expect nothing but abject cooperation, Otto."

Otto seemed troubled by the instruction, though Garf seemed resigned to the fact. It couldn't be helped.

It was Ram, after all - she didn't truly need Roswaal's blessing for people to follow her orders.

"Was gonna do it anyway." Token protests from the blond demi human, who took some irritation at the order out on his new aide. "Get over here, greenie."

Otto followed with little complaint, though much fear. It gave him a curious bounce to his step.

"Emilia." Ram began, tone glacial. "The villagers' anxiety has been mounting. Rosewaal has grown concerned they might act carelessly sooner rather than later. Act like how Barusu did - with little concern for consequences. They don't truly listen to anyone in the manner but him."

"I'm sorry."

"You regret it. But you'd do it again, if there was even the slightest chance one of them may know his whereabouts. Am I mistaken?"

"N-No." Dreadfully selfish, but lying suited her even worse.

"How self-centered." Ram commenting, the words gutting as a barb. "Hold onto that."

"What?"

"The villagers might act on impulse, sooner rather than later." She continued on, unwilling to expound. "I've had Garf prepare their meals sooner rather than later to buy time before their opinions sway. He's an excellent cook - it would be challenging to enjoy his fare while still believing one has been imprisoned. Otto has been volunteered for the same purpose. His cooperating openly with Garf might improve relations, if only up to a certain point."

"I'm sorry."

"Apologies won't do anything but waste your breath and my hearing." Ram refuted matter-of-factly. "I'm telling you this because we're running short of time, not to heap pointless blame. Rosewaal and I are doing all that I can to prolong what we have, but it all hinges on you, Miss Emilia. Barusu has faith in you. And I have faith in... his faith for you."

"Thank you, Ram. I think he'd have been glad to hear that."

The maid seemed to disagree.

"Hmph."

She'd tried again the same day. It didn't hurt so much this time. There wasn't much to cry over anymore. She was getting better at it.

It was only Ram awaiting her this time, with her face set in a thin, displeased line.

"You made me wait." Was her only comment. "Time I could have spent tending to Roswaal, or stifling the villager's mounting fears."

"Sorry."

"Have this." A little woven basket seemed to materialize in her grasp, wrapped tightly in linen. "Lunch. I don't believe you've eaten yet."

"I haven't." Hunger pangs were an annoyance. If she could have dealt with them as usual, it would have been of little concern. But Emilia feared the notion that any meal she'd down would be forced out in an acidic retch from the churning in her stomach.

She'd been bothered by Puck... not showing. But she knew he wasn't in any danger. Nothing could kill him. Nothing

would hurt him. It was a matter of taking care of herself until he'd returned, which would come soon. After the trials. After she beat them.

It had been different with Subaru. It felt wrong. He'd been taken. There was no other option. Forced into a dark room. Likely bound and blindfolded - there was no other way he'd surrender to anything less than that. If it terrified her to imagine that, what more for the one trapped in such conditions. She hoped he was being fed. She hoped he'd be free to return soon. That they weren't harming him. But she couldn't find out until she could leave. It would have certainly not hindered them.

The pangs kept her focused on the task at hand. Food was a distraction. She could do without it of her own volition for as long as Subaru had to.

"Thank you, Ram. But I've no need of it."

"Thank Otto." She corrected, uncaring. The shrug came naturally to the maid. "He happened upon me while distributing meals. Insisted I pass it along."

Ram bent down to lay the unneeded basket by the temple floor, before apparently deciding otherwise. "Miss Emilia."

The half elf turned to her. The maid stretched her basket-laden hands out, expectant - face brokering no room for protest even more decisively than usual.

"Otto insisted upon such, over concerns of your health. How it was his responsibility to look after the people Barusu valued until his return." She shook her head, well-kept strands of pink hair flopping about messily. "How presumptuous of him... but my duty as a maid of Roswaal manor insists that you take this to fulfill my assigned task."

"H-He might not be eating, where he... he's been taken. It would feel wrong."

"Do as you please after you receive it." Ram bluntly said. "The mere fulfillment of the task would put Otto at ease. And certainly Barusu would share the same sentiment. Am I mistaken?"

...

"Miss Emilia." She pinched the bridge of her nose, though not out of irritation. It seemed something more troubled, and the half elf felt bothersome for the difficulties her petulance caused. "The majority of Sanctuary's residents have been mobilized to search for him as we speak, and what Barusu lacks in nearly every aspect he makes up for in sheer volume. If he's within these borders, our delinquent will be found eventually."

...

"Very well. Consider this instead: If Barusu has been taken against his will, I'm certain he would be famished upon return. If not, I'm certain he'd still be starved for your companionship. Regardless of circumstance, a meal together after the incident wouldn't be disagreeable."

A nod. She took the basket in her hands. The little weaving felt like lead in her grip.

A curtsy in return. A farewell. The maid returned to her duties.

Emilia turned to the daunting temple yet again, purple eyes awash with determination.

The same frozen statues greeted her. It was cold all the way through. Her breath had turned frosted as the unforgiving chill burned at her nostrils.

She'd walked outside - she'd sworn she did. The temple was behind her, and sanctuary started back into her exhausted gaze.

But why was it still so cold? It seeped through her clothing and numbed her ashen flesh.

And Ram was gone. And Otto was gone. And Garf was gone. And Subaru was gone.

No one to greet her. No one to console, nor be consoled by.

No one to look at her with poorly-hidden disappointment in their eyes.

It had come morning now. It was too early for them to bother.

And it was just her. In a landscape blanketed by pale, broken sheets of snow.

Battered and pockmarked by pebbles of relentless hail.

The sparse pocket of villagers no longer looked at her the same way she'd been spoiled with. The warmth she'd shared with the people seemed to have long since faded with the absence of her knight. She couldn't blame them for this - they were trapped for her shortcomings, after all. Distaste was well within their rights.

Emilia felt sharp, falling pains glance at her head on her trudging return to the residence. It seemed even the very universe was intent to jeer at her failure.

***Chapter 2*: Chapter 2**

Garf had began arguing with Roswaal, disdain contorting his cragged features. Her sponsor seemed to disregard it, voice casual and consoling in the worst ways. Something of their plight, and how terrible it was, but they ought to move forward because it was simply out of their depth.

"What plight?" Emilia asked them, interrupting their argument. He turned his ire to her.

The blond's face morphed into a snarl, then subdued itself, settling into uncomfortable annoyance after a few seconds of loathsome staring at the half elf.

"The surplus." He spat the words in distaste, arms crossed as if restraining himself. His furious glare rotated around the inhabitants of the room.

Otto looked stricken and worried. Ram glared back. Roswaal seemed to smirk. Emilia met his gaze last, uncertain and bothered and helpless as she found herself to be quite often. The demi human's gaze finally fell on his short-statured companion, who tugged at his gloved hand concerningly. He relented, fists balled in impotent frustration Emilia couldn't understand.

It must have shone. Otto glanced at her pityingly, as if noticing her ignorance.

"Sanctuary's never been a prosperous locale..." The merchant explained, picking at his words carefully. "But they've always managed to live, at the very least."

"It's not living. We survive." Garf protested, unnervingly subdued. His eyes seemed to have dimmed with his temper.

"But the hailstones damaged the roofing of their storage buildings, and dirty snow seeped in through the cracks it caused. They'd be hard-pressed to last a week of what was left, even without the villagers to provide for. Even if we ration it to the bare minimum per person, I can't be certain how long it might last."

"Two, perhaps three days..." Roswaal supplied flippantly. "And another three days alive, though starving for that duration. We might last a week if the water remains pure, but we'd eventually succumb to that... provided, of course, we haven't all died of exposure by then. Garf's attire is the norm for Sanctuary. Ill-equipped would be the kindest words I could muster."

"You bastard!" He'd pulled the bedridden man up by the shoulders, and Emilia could have sworn she'd seen his fingers digging into Roswaal's bandaged shoulders.

"Garf." It came as a warning, dangerously clipped.

"It's fine, Ram." Roswaal warned off, unperturbed. "We'll sort this out, certainly..."

The sound of a sharpened tempest hummed to life. Otto took a protective step in front of the half-elf. It was so very familiar, and as unnecessary as it always was. She could take care of both of them. Emilia could try to, at least.

"Ram."

The piercing vibrations slowed, settling into an uncomfortably dull buzz. The maid's expression still smoldered despite Roswaal's assurance.

"It's a tragedy, certainly - you've my sympathy to your plight... or is it the plight we share now?" Teeth gnashed and ground together in abhorrence. "Irrelevant, I suppose. But merely an inconvenience. Our dear Emilia would have the trials cleared before it ever came to that rather inconvenient point, correct?"

Yes. She was making progress. It didn't hurt that much anymore. She could go more than once a day. Every time she went, the time in between shortened and shortened and shortened until nothing would remain and Sanctuary would be free. Emilia nodded frantically, bobbing her head so quickly her vision seemed to swim.

"Bullshit. She's been failing faster is all that changed." Garf argued, anger renewing. "How the hell do we even know the freak snowstorm isn't her doing?"

"It's not."

It's not. It's not.

"It's never snowed here. Never in decades. Never." His voice had fallen dangerously low. "But here you come, and within two days this happens. Those were the *only* buildings damaged by the hail and snow and... arggh!!!"

"Garf..." Ryuzu gently called out. He turned to glare and failed, the anger ebbing out from her calming presence.

"We could buy more time for Sanctuary." Otto resumed speaking. "Just listen, please - we could bring the villagers out. Without those extra mouths to feed, your people could last at least a week. And we could come back with supplies to buy people more time!"

"I don't believe you understand why Garfiel can't accept that proposal, Otto..." Roswaal intruded, ending with a frivolous shake of his head.

"Shut up!" He snarled at the bandaged man, before turning his attention to the hapless merchant. "And I can't buy a single word an outsider says anymore. You'd leave and never come back - your kind always does. That's why we're trapped here. Bastards, all of you!"

"Allow us to explain. Please, please - I don't believe we've convinced you properly." The tone was placating and ineffectual.

"No. No. You've said enough. All of you. Now shut up and listen before I start making mistakes." Garf's fists curled, and Emilia could vaguely make out the flecks of red and shorn bandages on his fingers.

Roswaal stopped. The blond began to speak, voice utterly devoid of anything but cold rationality and barely-fettered fury.

"Your caravan... from the manor and the village and all that stuff. How long would it take to stock and staff? Two, three weeks at best? Assuming you'd even return, we'd have starved or died of cold by then. It wouldn't make a difference even if you came back - and don't you dare lie to me. You wouldn't have come back - no one ever does."

Otto made to protest until he'd been silenced by a wilting glare.

From Roswaal of all people. He capitulated in shame.

"And you, half elf. You've whipped the villagers into a frenzy, you know that? Some of them are starting to think I kidnapped him." He threw his hands up in the air, letting them fall on the table with a thud. Splintered wood shattered off the corner, and Otto flinched. "I sure as hell would have, if I knew it'd come to this!"

He'd taken to biting his lip. It seemed he was determined to gnaw it off.

"You're not the only one who asked them questions. This all happened before, didn't it? Snow all over in the middle of the year. Biting, harsh cold."

"It wasn't Miss Emilia's fault." A sharp voice rebutted in her favor.

"I'd rather ask Emilia herself, Ram." He silenced, and even Ram seemed taken aback at his tone. He turned his condemning gaze on her. "Well?"

"It was... Puck."

"What the hell is a Puck?"

"My friend. It can't have been him."

"Even the villagers - the damn villagers - didn't know this, did they? 'Course they wouldn't."

"It can't be him. He hasn't shown since-"

"And Roswaal, you bastard. I don't even know where to begin without wanting to tear your head off."

He smiled at the angry demi human. "Typical Garfiel."

"Bastard." He repeated with a yell. "I'll work with all of you until I can get the residents the hell out of this... HIS prison, but you'd all better be out of my sight by then."

"But what about our people?" Otto asked, one final time.

"What about our people!?" He roared back, shoulders heaving from ragged breath.

Then slumping, arms slackened at his side. Defeated - it was somehow scarier then when he'd threatened to attack them. Despair, then. It must have been.

Nothing else was quite so painfully infectious.

"Do whatever it takes - the girl's slipping up. Let herself get cut upside the head by hail without saying a word. Stubborn as hell about doing the trials again. I don't care how many times she has to take the trials. Just make sure the last one succeeds before anyone dies."

He paused, eyes downcast and hesitating at his words. Pained shame glistened from his emerald eyes before he blinked it away and continued.

"We just want to live. And we've got a better chance with you people here then without them - who gives a damn about a place like this anyhow? You'll be feed and taken care of as good as any of our people would be. We won't hoard the little we have left. No point not to anyhow. And we're not cruel. Just trapped. Just desperate."

Ryuzu offered a hand to grasp, which he took, the tiny thing swallowed from view. Emilia couldn't tell who's hands were trembling between the two of them.

"And we'll... the trial will be done by then. Hopefully. If not, then I guess we'll all just starve together."

Emilia returned to the temple again. Attempted the trial again. Failed again.

But failed less. It was still the same night greeting her. The same speckled stars and the same shimmering snow that twinkled in the sparse moonlight.

She could try more. She couldn't give up. She was going to be fine. She would get it done.

She wasn't alone, after all. At the very least, they were all alone together.

There wasn't any time to spare. None at all.

A few wracked breaths, a minute of wretched, shameful sobs that scratched at her throat. Nothing more.

Her hunger had subsumed into sheer, grim determination. It didn't ache the same way it did earlier. It was a reminder more than anything.

Subaru would be hungry too, after all. It'd be bad manners to start so soon. She was certain he'd wait for her - it was the least she could have done.

Emilia about-faced and stepped forward, returning earlier than she ever had for her fourth and hopefully final trial.

It hadn't been.

Emilia doubled over outside by the stone, knees threatening to buckle as a meal she'd never downed threatened to ravage her parched throat. Bile and saliva barely trickled from her heaving form, cementing relief at her decision - it would have taken longer if she'd eaten. Wasted time, when every day past the third might very well be their last.

It all fell on her, and if could bear all that even half as well as Subaru always did...

She wiped a long sleeve past the corner of her lips, knowing full well how strongly Ram - irked at the added workload - and Subaru - surprisingly conscious due to his own experiences at laundering - would have lamented her lapse of grace. She'd have well preferred it over the overbearing silence that threatened to crush her chest flat.

Puck would have chided her for such unladylike behavior, before he began lapping at his own paw with an air of playful hypocrisy.

She imagined that to be his reaction, at least. It had been so long she wasn't certain anymore.

She wouldn't have to imagine it. She wouldn't have to miss it. She just needed to succeed.

And she would.

She had someone by her side, after all.

It was just a shame they couldn't walk alongside her towards the fifth attempt.

The cold didn't bother her. Truth be told, she couldn't even feel it anymore. It couldn't hurt her, no matter how much it tried. Even as it mounted and buried the half elf, snuffing out her harsh, strained breaths.

She'd almost laughed, really, once the dream gave way to lonesome, familiar stone floors.

It had began to accumulate by the entrance of the temple, layered snowdrifts that reached right up to her knees.

Emilia glanced about, cautious of prying eyes. They couldn't tell Subaru what she'd do now - he'd never let her live it down!

Relieved at the lack of surveillance, the half elf ducked into a squat, digging her fingers deep into the pocket of layered white.

It was so soft, really. Like the inside of a pillow.

Minus the feathers, obviously.

She began to wonder why she'd ever been afraid of it to begin with...

And stopped, about-faced yet again, and proceeded with her sixth.

There wasn't much to be said about the seventh. And she couldn't even remember the eighth.

She just remembered them happening. Just snow and silhouettes and statues.

But it hadn't been her last, so it wasn't worth the thought.

She had to be careful. Super-duper-careful, in fact.

(Subaru would make fun of her for using the word, but it fit what she meant better than any other word could. Her knight would just have to deal with it when he got back.)

(And he would be back, even if she had to drag herself through the trials another thousand times over.)

"Emilia."

"Subaru?"

She looked around, hoping to glance her missing friend. Nothing but snow and trees and...

"Garfiel." He grunted, eyes cross for a moment. He rolled them quickly. "We don't even sound remotely alike. What the hell?"

"S-Sorry." She apologized bashfully, swaying in place lazily. "No one else calls me that. It's always 'Miss' and 'Lady' with everyone else, so I speculated-"

"Speculated - who even says that word?"

Emilia giggled, despite herself. "You even sound like him..." She laughed some more, ignoring the dryness that clawed at her throat in favor of the pleasant memory.

"No, I don't!? You're..." He seemed taken aback. Strange. And also a bit rude - Emilia pouted at him in retaliation.

"I'm allowed to enjoy myself too..."

"You're starting to creep me out... it's getting real hard to stay mad at you now..."

Emilia's hands moved to rest at her hip, growing more bothered by the moment. "You've no right to say such mean things."

His eyes widened in realization - she did wish she could tell what it was he'd realized, though. "Forget it. We need to talk."

"We're talking now." She teased, head drooping to the side. Then to the other. It gave the world a delightful little bounce, so she kept at it.

"You're losing it..." He mumbled a bit too loudly.

"How discourteous of you. Even I have feelings that can get hurt, you know?"

"It's about Subaru."

"He's back?!" Of course he had. He'd promised. She grabbed Garfiel's hand, bouncing like the child she'd sworn she'd outgrown. "Where?! Where!?"

He looked at her sadly - he was just so... ugh, rude. She could get excited too! She didn't always have to be a prim and proper lady.

"He hasn't come back."

"Oh." Those words just sounded so wrong. No matter how true they might have been - no, they weren't true. He just wasn't back yet. The yet was very important.

"I don't think he will." Garfiel had taken to rubbing the back of his neck, uncomfortable. Of course he was - he wasn't sure of it.

"I don't believe you. He'll be back. He always comes back." Gosh - it was startling how little everyone else seemed to know him.

It was the first thing they should ought to. Really. It was so frustrating to know just how little thought they put into him... indignation began to stir, only to be shunted away by responsibility she'd once found crushing.

"I have a trial to succeed now. Distractions simply won't do, Garf." She turned again, not quite eager for another trial so much as Garfiel for the moment. A hand wrapped around her sleeved limb, rooting her in place. She tried pulling herself against the vice ineffectively. Her body gave from the exertion and flopped like a marionette, only for bare arms to catch her by her sleeves and plop the half elf back in place.

A strange sound emanated from his lips - primal and furious. It reminded her of the beasts she'd tried to keep at bay from the village, howling ceaselessly into the night.

"You dumbass..." He eyed her carefully, at ease with the notion she wouldn't leave the conversation and dropping his grip. "Look, this won't be easy, a-and I'll only say this once: he's gone."

"You don't know him." Else he wouldn't be saying that. "You really don't know him."

"Obviously I sure as hell don't! I've known him for three days and he's been a topic for two of them." He'd broken eye contact, crossed his arms, and turned his back to her. "But I saw him off when he left."

"What are you saying."

Why was he lying? Why did he keep lying? Why about this, of all things?!

"I saw him leave. He was on his mount. Stopped him to ask what the hell he was doing. Just him, riding off to the manor on his earth dragon. S'what he said, at least."

"What did... what did he say then? A-Anything else?"

Garf's foot began bouncing. The fingers on his right hand began to drum at the side of his thigh. His expression turned contemplative, shifting with thought as if weighing his options. It fell into a thin line of disappointment a few moments later, like if he'd found all of them wanting, before speaking irregardless.

"That he left to help you. And he'd never betray ya. That he wanted best for everyone - even the people like me holding his friends hostage. Real convincing... even I bought it."

"He wouldn't lie."

"Maybe not to you. Uppity as hell, him - all those promises I just know he won't be good for."

"He wouldn't harm anyone!"

Garf grunted in not-quite protest. "Doesn't mean he'd help. Might want the best for everyone, but that means nothing if he won't even show his face again. He could leave, so he did. Nothing too complicated about it... 'cept for one thing I gotta ask." His gaze focused, going from speculative to suspicious in a heartbeat.

"If it helps you find him, please ask away. Anything."

"Not making this easy for me, are you?" He chided... right? Why did he sound so bothered? "He said... He's seen hell. Could see it in his eyes. Just something that goes beyond getting hurt, tired as hell, not giving a crap even when I wrung his neck and damn near splattered his head on a tree. Just smirking without a care in the world like some twisted, broken thing. Because he'd figured out how to piss me off. The hell kind of things he's been through?"

He'd been a stranger then. He'd fought The Bowel Hunter for her sake, stomach split harshly from her parting blow.

And he smiled at her. Even as his eyes dulled and faded into unconsciousness. For another stranger - a half elf, no less. One that wore the visage of the Witch of Envy.

No, for her, Emilia. And she couldn't fathom why, despite all the time they'd spent together since then.

They'd barely, barely kept him alive. His blood had begun to pool and marred the satin fabric that clung to her, but she didn't care then.

He'd worked himself to tears tending to Roswaal's manor with Ram, instead of demanding a guest's hospitality like he'd have most certainly been permitted.

She'd remembered that day just like the one that came before. The same broken tears that slicked his tortured expression. How stiffly he'd trembled lain atop her lap, fear and pain and something more lapping incessantly at the back of his mind. He'd stayed for hours, and she'd been more than prepared to accommodate him longer.

He'd left with gratitude, though his face fell after he'd wept - as if shamed by his own humanness. It very well might have been - he'd always wanted to be seen as someone so strong. It must have been exhausting.

They'd fought after the ordeal. She'd remembered it vaguely... painful words were exchanged, with the unrelenting finality of a wake. They'd parted ways for what felt like the last time, despite how needless it felt, looking back. He hadn't been the only child between the two of them that day.

No. He'd argued for her respect. For the cruelty they'd shown her - one she'd learned to accept, and did so the same day. One she'd learned to expect so certainly she'd turned her outrage on him. Even after he'd been beaten for his audacity. Even knowing it would have led to something far worse that day, without Julius' timely intervention.

And he'd moved to rout the White Whale. Turn two of her staunchest opponents into powerful allies for that campaign. Rode into battle all by his lonesome on a borrowed steed. Maneuvering the terrifying beast to be crushed under the old tree.

Even in his absence, it never was. The children in the carriage had tended to her as much as she did them, thanks to his unrequested concern. He'd rode into view with nary a word, stealing away the danger and darting away with it in tow before the devastation could consume them.

He'd always saved her. Even when she'd never asked for it. No... she'd never needed to ask for it. Subaru had always beaten the danger away, be it by her side or sprinting frantically to make it so.

Because he loved her. And she couldn't understand, but he'd wait as long as he had to until she could.

And she couldn't understand, no matter how much she wanted to. It was difficult.

Not in the way it was to walk about the city. Emilia had never been scorned for not understanding - only for being who she was. It was sad, but nice in a strange way - she couldn't help it, after all. There was some relief to knowing it was inevitable, and you weren't doing anything truly wrong beyond existing with a scorned face.

But here and now, it was saddening to know her ignorance was paining someone else, and it wouldn't have to if she'd been a bit better as a person. Just a bit less ignorant of the apparent. She wanted to understand, like how Auntie Fortuna seemed to. She'd made it all seem so simple then. As if love was something people just woke up to.

It was and it wasn't. She was trying, but Emilia was certain she'd been getting something wrong. It felt different from all the books and the people who'd lived them. It felt off.

"W-We could have helped him?! Why would you let him leave? Why would you not tell anyone else! Why would you not tell..."

"Ah? I'm telling you now, aren't I?" He scoffed. "You're the only other one who does. Keep it that way."

"Why tell me?"

Why not tell me sooner?

Her keen focus had turned tumultuous, betraying her mind. The answer should have been everything for the moment, but a few trials later came the desperate doubts and dozens of pointless questions she couldn't help but ask.

"You're getting worse every time you try it again. Failing faster." He snubbed, huffing from a combination of cold and frustration. "Couldn't keep a secret if it meant everyone dying because you were distracted, and clearly that was a mistake. Just glad he didn't make a vow out of it. Maybe this makes a difference down the line, but watching you go inside seventeen times sure as hell wouldn't. Can't keep going at it like this."

He'd miscounted, surely.

"I've been there for twelve."

He didn't argue, but his green eyes glinted, troubled. It was hard to protect so many people - maybe the stress was finally getting to him.

He didn't stand in the way of her next attempt, thankfully.

It would be her thirteenth. Or possibly eighteenth. She didn't spare the question any more thought.

The only trial that mattered would be the last one, after all.

It was getting easier.

Emilia had come across the perfect system, really. One that didn't permit her such treacherous, focus-sapping thoughts. She needed every ounce of her waning strength. There was no point consoling herself with curiosity.

After the trial ended, she'd rise immediately before the things she couldn't understand made her feel sad again. She'd sprint outside, boots knocking on the stone like the cheeriest earth dragon that ever was, clearing the threshold of the temple. Then wrapping around to return to the marbled room. No time to think - no time for even consider more lapses, and it achieved that goal impeccably.

The snow came as it always did. The statues smiled - and she returned the courtesy.

It saved her time. So much time. It hadn't even been a day yet and she'd already lost count how many times she'd done it through the morning alone!

She'd taken a rare break - the first of it's kind since she'd put her marvelous system into practice, legs and rear

splayed on the pillowy snow. It was soft and inviting after so many moments doing the same on unforgiving stone.

Garfiel hadn't been mistaken, even if he was a bit rude sometimes. She couldn't afford to be distracted. Not at a critical time like now, where lives hung in the balance unforgivingly. It was better to sort through her own concerns until they couldn't bother her anymore, and sort through them she did.

Lost in thought. Dazed. Bothered. She needed to rectify that - preferably by her lonesome. There was no purpose in panicking the people dependent on her.

It was simple. Dreadfully simple, and borne of her own shortcomings.

She'd put her knight through hell. Her friend... the word seemed lacking, though she couldn't quite understand why. What else could it have been?

Who else had been by side his side the entire time? At the very least, she ought to have noticed his fraying strength.

No, Emilia never had, as ruefully as the awareness buffeted her distraught mind. She hadn't seen Subaru shattering at the manor. She'd simply seen how the pain decimated his confidence, far too late to prevent the agony. All she could do was provide company, in the hopes his strength could recover with the little comfort she could provide.

It thankfully had, but the terrifying realization finally set in: there had been no guarantee of his renewal. He could have just as easily succumbed to the exhaustion, and she'd have been just as helpless then as she felt now.

She'd never noticed, and she wouldn't have now. No wonder he hadn't come to her with his sorrows - she'd soundly proven herself lacking. Even that meager service had been denied of him. Despite all the good he'd done for her, all the time and wounds he'd rendered for her cause, he didn't believe she truly cared for his well-being.

And it would have been difficult to fault him for such. Impossible, really, for all the nothing she'd done to bely the sentiment.

No wonder he'd left. No wonder he didn't seem perturbed by the threats to his life in the least. He'd felt alone, and returned to the one person that made him feel less so. The blue-haired girl sleeping in the mansion, fingers curling in a gentle grip over her chest. Speechless yet dearly comforting to him all the same.

More so than Emilia had ever been, in treacherous hindsight. She'd more than deserved the loss of his company. The graceful part of her instructed she do just that... though the wretchedly shameful, selfish part of her psyche hoped for the undeserved forgiveness he'd always spoiled her with.

She'd seen in and heard it and quite honestly knew it during their brief return to the mansion.

Subaru had always been, however flawed and impulsive, bright and cheery and larger than life itself in her company. And it hadn't been a concern until she'd seen how he carried himself when distanced from her company. When he'd been unafraid to show the weaker side of him. By another's bedside in the near dead of night - she'd always had rather sharp ears, and even if she hadn't it would have been difficult to ignore walking past the room.

He'd sounded so earnest then. So tired. So very, very broken and weary and hopeful all at once talking to the slumbering girl. His voice paused and cracked regaling her with tales the blue-haired one never responded to, but he'd always been so unashamed and content to do so. To look crazed and pained and human and truly, unquestionably candid.

She'd so rarely, rarely seen that particular side of him, despite his vaunted trust in her - as if he'd slighted her by having his own lapses. As if she'd have cast him away like refuse if she'd seen dare to suffer.

Hadn't she nearly done just that no so long ago? For causing an outcry - such a petty, petty reason she'd believed her anger vindicated by. She couldn't fault him for feeling that way. Emilia liked to think she'd proved him wrong if it came to that, but the memory swept like the sharp, chomping wind she'd thought herself inured to. He'd been well within his rights to loathe her, and yet he hadn't, and she'd taken it for granted until the privilege had been revoked.

And she'd never even noticed until now. She'd been such a child...

And like any other child and their pain, she moved to distance herself from it. She'd pushed her numb body off the snow, careful not to accidentally fall over from the exertion. Getting hurt would be a distraction - and her last attempt to clear her mind had just backfired spectacularly.

She could put it to use then, yes? The trials... she couldn't remember them. But she couldn't remember other things too, right? Whatever had taken her thoughts at those moments had been swept aside long since - so meticulously she couldn't even remember forgetting. It would be perfect!

A few trials to clear her mind then. The new approach bought her a good deal more time for the opportunity.

The final one ought to come soon enough.

He'd known hell. Obviously - she must have dragged him along the journey. He'd braved it for the two of them. All because of her ignorance - a curse she'd yet to break, and one that came to fruition against the only one undeserving of it. And she'd never noticed. Or never cared to notice. Selfish beyond measure against the person who'd promised her the world and more. Subaru would have been disappointed by now, surely. To support such a pathetic ruler. Driven by selfish wishes, above all else. To warm a frozen world, and an entire aspiring kingdom... would be nothing more than a tool for it, at the end of the day. No matter how well she did, for all the good she'd doubted she'd even deliver on, it would all ultimately be tainted by her own warped self-serving reasoning.

But she wanted to hear it from him, no matter how pointed the words would be. No matter how deeply they cut. She'd welcome the pain if it came with company.

The choice wasn't her's. Never had been. Despair smothered the pitiful yearning, forcing her murky gaze forward.

The closest to it she could manage was another trial. Painless and pointless... until it wasn't. That hour would come eventually, and she'd be free to search properly.

It would have to do.

The statues had started to grin at her, frozen lips stretched like glass. Teeth bared in a chattering grin.

She'd begun to smile back at them now, grateful for the comfort they offered.

They weren't so bad, really.

Emilia had long lost track of time.

It meant her focus was unflappable.

Marvelous.

A hand she hadn't paid attention to dragged her in between her quick reprieve between trials. Someone had pulled her towards the loud scene, though she couldn't remember her arrival. How the boot prints that trailed behind could have been hers - they were so shallow, as if a child had made a game of it.

It must have been Ryuzu dragging her along - the leading hand had been so small in her grasp. It reminded her of Petra.

People were arguing. Demi humans and villagers that stayed behind. Garfiel was furious. Fur and muscle bloated in segments around his body, shifting with his mercuric temper as more people began shouting so loudly she couldn't understand a word anyone said.

She didn't care for the conversation. It simply came to her - the little spirits seemed so sad right now, whispering their implicit truths in the corners of her mind.

Otto had fled in the night, taking half the villagers with him. The other half had been glad to stay and ensure their safe travel past the boundary of Sanctuary.

They hadn't taken any supplies on the journey. They didn't want the people left behind endangered. Any people - they'd intended to buy a handful of days with their absence. It shouldn't have come to that.

Her failures accumulated like snowflakes, and the weight had finally taken to crushing everyone's resolve.

She could see it in their eyes - everyone that'd spare her a glance, when they weren't occupied spitting in the snow. The condemning glares, the pitiful looks. Everything in between that - and there was a good deal between that. A good deal she'd forgotten even existed.

Emilia could see one among the crowd: a cat demi human, with sickly ears - the grey fur had fallen off in patches, leaving raw pink flesh exposed to the elements. He'd been young, no taller than Ram, shuddering from the cold, anger etched deeply into his features. His arm had been wound back out of view.

And a stone hurtled towards her. It struck the half elf's shoulder painfully. She'd lost her balance, crumpling onto the snow like the sickly heap she felt.

Ryuzu had moved to act, standing between her weary form and the aggravated crowd, arms spread and prepared to weather blows.

A villager had noticed the exchange. A tall, brown-haired man with tan skin and gaunt cheeks. He roared something Emilia couldn't make out and tackled the instigator to the ground, straddling the feline demi human and raining heavy blows.

Another demi human roused to action, swatting a meaty tail against his head. Then another villager acted yet again, forcing off the reptilian woman's reprisal on their comrade.

It was vicious and cyclical and borne of her failure.

Ryuzu led her away, back to the temple she'd never intended to leave until she'd succeeded.

By the threshold near the stairs, a roar split in the distance.

Emilia pushed the thought from her mind and carried on with her duty.

Ram had been waiting expectantly, instructing her in no uncertain terms she was to report to her sponsor alongside her.

Her tone brokered no room for argument. Roswaal always had a plan.

She'd followed the maid as long as she could until her knees buckled and toppled her over. And again.

An annoyed expression struck her escort's face, and the smaller girl had simply scooped the election candidate in her wiry arms.

Emilia pouted all the while. She could stand, really! She was just a bit sleepy now. It would pass soon enough.

She'd been dropped unceremoniously onto the chair, mildly suspecting she'd bounced off the wooden stool.

"How goes the triaaaaals?" The bedridden magician asked, eyebrow quirked inquisitively.

Wouldn't he know that, though?

Or he might be asking it for Ram's sake. She'd turned her gaze to the maid in question, being met in kind with a dismissive scowl.

She shook her head.

"Shame, shame... but to be expected. The fact you're alive and well speaks wonders of your compatibility, however." He explained the singsong voice she'd grown attuned to. "Unlike my, shall we say, lacking self. You are truly quite the specimen, young lady."

She nodded empty at the praise.

"I've caught word of some truly, truly, truly intriguing information about our dear friend."

Emilia paid rapt attention. She'd scoured his face as if the answers had been penned on his cheeks.

"Wh-" her voice shattered like ice. "Wh..."

"Oh dear... Ram, if you would be so kind."

A cup of water was pushed into her palms, another set of digits folding her own against the side. The same hand moved to guide it towards her cracking lips.

She shook her head.

"Come now, dear. It wouldn't make for much of a conversation if it were only myself speaking, would it?"

Reluctantly, she let the maid guide the mug towards her mouth, feeling the burning trickle down her throat.

"Wonderful." He clapped his hands at the word for emphasis. "Now, where we we? Ah, yes... Subaru. Garfiel of all people had brought it to my attention our mutual, mutual friend hadn't necessarily been taken. Against his will, at least."

...

"Stunned silence, I imagine? Even I find his claim rather surprising. That he'd fled on his earth dragon towards the mansion, with nary a word to anyone else... my, he'd truly changed a great deal if that were so, wouldn't it?"

...

"Have you any of your own suspicions, dear? You seem rather perturbed at the moment. Perhaps it would be a splendid idea to discuss what it is ailing you. It wouldn't bode well forcing you to undergo the trials troubled, after all."

"He... might have left because of me."

"Oh?"

"He said he'd-" She paused, reluctant to admit the words. "He claimed Subaru said he'd 'Seen hell'. Nearly gotten killed by him by Garfiel, and all he did was smile like he didn't care what became of him."

"Interesting, interesting..."

"He promised..."

That he'd be by her side. That he'd loved her.

It had always been incomprehensible. Just not in this way.

"Why did he leave?"

Why. Why. Why.

"Hmph." Roswaal began, smirking like he knew. Perhaps he did - he always seemed to. "If I must hazard a guess, I doubt it's for the reasons you believe. That he doesn't trust you. That's he's grown tired of you. Am I mistaken?"

"N-No..."

What else could it be? She awaited the answer she knew would disappoint her.

"Ram, do you believe Subaru would ever abandon our fine future king?"

The maid shook her head quickly. "Barusu is a simpleton and a disappointment, but he'd never leave Miss Emilia's side without good cause or her explicit instructions."

That was true, sadly. She'd given the latter not very long ago, and he'd respected her decision as much as it pained both of them.

Yet another contribution to her ever-growing tally of errors.

"It's quite the opposite, really. He trusts you a great deal, you see?" He began to explain. "He'd never leave your side unless he was absolutely confident you'd be up to the task - anything less than that would utterly unfathomable to imagine of him. Can you seriously envision the boy who'd been survived the bowel hunter and defeated not only the White Whale, but an Archbishop of Sin for your sake would ever grow disillusioned enough to abandon you?"

No. Not in the least. Even considering the possibility now seemed to spit on his sacrifices. It was reprehensible and ungrateful. Her eyes drifted to the wooden flooring, trying and failing to look past her transgressions. He'd thought better of her, and every new revelation made it so very, very hard to live up to that person he believed her to be.

"He trusts in you. Subaru trusts you. He trusts in your success in this endeavor - the fact you're alive, unharmed, and speaking before me is proof enough his convictions were well-founded indeed. It wouldn't do to disappoint him before he even returns, would it?"

No. No, he was right. He was right and Garf was wrong - he hadn't abandoned anyone. He hadn't abandoned her.

He was just... outside. Waiting for her. Cheering that bright little jingle from beyond the ridge. Victory, was it?

She giggled despite herself - it certainly sounded like something he'd do. Even as gawkers gathered at his absurd display he wouldn't abandon his way.

Because he believed in it. And believed in her. Roswaal was right.

It wouldn't do to disappoint his trust. Not anymore. She'd wished she'd learned of it sooner.

The smiles seemed so hollow now. Mocking.

Surely, they didn't intend to be so rude?

It wasn't like she could inform them of their slight.

Their ears had long frozen over.

She'd taken to polishing the statues with the excess of her sleeves, wiping the mist of their faces.

It just felt right. Nostalgic, even, but in a way that made her chest tighten.

She'd left the threshold briefly in between sets.

A few wandering spirits had flocked around her, buzzing with misplaced concern. A bright, blue orb rested by her struck shoulder, droning with a low hum of concern. It was joined by a melodic symphony, full of the same warmth they always granted her.

Emilia smiled at their presence. They were always so nice even when she knew she didn't deserve it. The last time they'd rallied to her side, they'd been destroyed by a spiteful being. And yet here the little spirits were, heedless of the danger in lieu of naked care.

But distractions wouldn't do. Not now of all times, when there was someone depending on her.

She made that very clear, and one by one the pretty lights reluctantly left her side.

Emilia didn't leave from the temple floor. She'd no longer lost her way.

Unconsciousness had simply yielded as she slowly but surely made the progress she'd been trusted to make.

There was no need to leave the temple anymore. The trials commenced when she'd allowed them to.

And they kept going. So did she.

No hunger, nor thirst, nor pain, nor exhaustion. Nothing would yield to the unshakeable trust she'd been granted.

She'd safeguard it for him until she could return it, and she couldn't return it until she'd freed Sanctuary.

Nothing would distract her. She wouldn't allow it.

Trials began and ended in the blink of an eye. Faster and stronger and stranger with each new iteration.

Nothing would yield. She certainly wouldn't. She couldn't.

Until the door behind her turned, and someone began staggering past the stone barrier with pained steps.

Emilia turned to face it, holding out the faintest of undeserved hopes despite everything.

And was rewarded with a mop of dark, ruffled hair peeking behind the stone frame.

"Subaru?"

***Chapter 3*: Chapter 3**

"Emilia..."

He was back! He was back! He was back!

The excitable half elf ambled towards the voice, careful not to trip and make a fool of herself. The world of frost remained bright and blinding as ever, seared into her vision until snow was all would ever see for a good amount of time. The fainting spells in between trials had been kindness, most likely - allow their poor failure of a subject some time for their sight to return, between the blinding snow and the dim stone temple. She'd shed the need long ago, but it was a shame not to be reunited with the view of his comforting face.

"That's right, Subaru. It's me." She half-proclaimed, half-pleaded to his blurry face. The tremor in her own grew, and she swallowed the fear best she could.

There was a thump of flesh and fabric, knocking against her frail body like a falling cabinet. Emilia yelped, frantic, arms outstretched around the fallen person.

She'd never held another like this - not since she'd been a child... when she couldn't even have her own hands meet behind their backs, when Auntie Fortuna laughed at how big she'd gotten. To make fun of her, of course, and Uncle Geuse always rolled rubbed her head 'till she pouted the way most children did when you made fun of them.

It must have been Subaru - she wished she could see, but it had to be. The height was just right, and there wasn't much to feel leaning against her - toned and fit from the exercises he insisted on daily. The same coat too - the one with the sleek, metal ribs lining the contours - poking strangely against her dress.

Subaru grunted from some exertion she couldn't make out past her addled vision. He must have been drained.

"S-Sorry..."

So it was him. And that was wonderful enough.

Emilia failed to contain her burgeoning smile, pulled him closer, and rested the bottom of her chin on the crook of his welcoming shoulder.

"Emilia?"

His arms still rested over her own. She could hear them swaying limply, and pointedly not hugging back.

It hurt, but he'd had more than enough reason for act that. She'd been a horrible king - no, a horrible friend.

But...

"I was so lonely..." Emilia could hear his gasp come from behind the corner of her ear. "I was so lonely, Subaru."

The tears didn't come, thankfully. Yet another blessing of her unprecedented focus - nothing left to weep with. Her heart convulsed in her throat, but she pressed onwards with her truth. The two of them needed honesty, after the sad display on their parts - no, hers and hers alone. Even if it hurt, she... she needed closure.

Some semblance of it. Please.

"You just went and left me behind."

It sounded so very, very wrong. It sounded like a lie, even now.

How dare it be so undeniable? How dare it weigh on her so heavily, hour-after-painstaking-hour?

How dare she hold it against him, after everything they'd been through together?

Yet here she was, entitling herself to just that.

Emilia buried the corrosive thoughts under a smile, hoping they shattered like glass before she did.

"N-No, I didn't..." He denied.

Lied.

"I left a letter... explaining everything."

Lies.

"What are you talking about?" She asked, voice singsong and lighter than it had reason to be. "Huh?"

Auntie Fortuna had been right - boys really did like to play dumb, even when caught red-handed with that sheepish smile... the one her uncle wore like a second skin.

Emilia couldn't help it: she laughed. Joyously, at the memory, and where it was leading her now. The half elf spun the same way she'd seen before, nearly a century ago, hoping she'd did her Auntie proud with the motion. "You don't need to make excuses."

Everything had long been forgiven. The question was where she'd even begin to earn his.

"You've come back to me, after all." She turned to face him again, disappointed his visage hadn't even sharpened a little after all this time talking but continuing on unbothered. "You know, I never stopped believing..."

It was easier to stumble where she wanted to be now. It had always been by her side, after all. Home.

Emilia felt for purchase on his distant figure, clasping a shoulder and leaning her face into his chest. The sharp teeth of his garment tickled her nose.

"That you'd come to me." She lowered the hand, settling back into the comfortable position over maybe his beating heart - it was difficult to make out with any clarity.

"That if I did my best to fulfill my task, you'd come to save me." She could hear the thrum of it in her ear - the pulse of the very world. The only one left. The only one that mattered. "That's what you've always, always done, after all."

She broke off the contact - after some hesitation - to look him in the eyes.

"Right?"

Or eye now, it seemed. The other seemed hidden behind a scarf. What a curious fashion statement - it suited him well, from the little she could make out even now. Drew out the coolness, as he'd vehemently deny but discretely appreciate away from her presence.

Emilia concealed a smile at the sight. In another life, perhaps she'd try doing the same. Something smaller, though - maybe an eyepatch...

Yes, a cute eyepatch would suit her wonderfully!

And she'd gotten distracted... hmph. Subaru seemed lost - his hadn't moved at all, and Emilia could vaguely make out the whites of his eyes transfixed in place. And-

"Subaru, you know... how you always try to touch my hair?"

And she'd always been... less than responsive, generally. Uncle Geuse had always warned her about it: About how a boy touching her silver hair would have it fall off, one strand at a time, every time. They'd always said she'd been a gullible girl, but she'd (rightfully) argue that Uncle Geuse was just that convincing a person.

"I'm returning the favor."

The scarf brushed against her wrist, silken and oddly scruffy. It was the hair that caught her attention, jet black and just dangerous to himself as her own silver locks. Damning her knight to scrutiny and distrust as a foreigner in their lands, beaten to a shuddering pulp by a merciful soul - the word still seemed ill suited to the damage inflicted - to prevent reprisals of those with less restraint than Julius.

He wore the mark unashamed, far better than the half elf did her own. It felt good to ruffle it between her fingers - it scrunched like stiff fabric, and she released her grasp.

"I was so scared." She confessed, loathing her selfishness but deferring to the needed honesty on her part. Especially if it hurt.

"I thought maybe you'd actually gotten sick of me."

And you've every right to.

"I thought you'd grown to hate me."

And you've been a fool not to.

"So I got scared and came here, but it didn't help at all."

Nothing really did anymore.

"So I was really, truly happy when you showed up!"

And you showed up! And I realized...

"Stay with me forever."

That was all that mattered.

"As long as I have you, I don't need anything else."

I promise.

"I'm sorry about everything."

Where do I even begin making amends?

"I hope you feel the same way about me."

If you didn't...

She giggled at herself - such a stupid, pointless thought. There was never any doubt, after all.

Doubt didn't belong in the same sentence as Subaru. Ever.

Beautiful things did.

"I love you, Subaru."

<- ->

There. She said it - the words that had people fawning and bawling over one another in those tender embraces.

She'd never understood them then, really. Emilia had never been a particularly aware child, and the world had practically ruptured itself over the hundred years she...

Couldn't remember. Only that there were - there had to be - and they'd passed on. As have the people she must have left behind.

Leaving the half elf with nothing to their name beyond a borrowed face and a spinning head full of jumbled thoughts. In a world of inconceivable promises and complicated feelings she could barely, tenuously keep her footing in. Nothing to strive for beyond righting wrongs she couldn't even remember making, save the guilt that gnawed on her like a relentless, deserved parasite for the sins she must have wrought.

But all that was in the past. To be buried in snow and memories, like all the others.

Emilia looked towards her future, grateful her throbbing eyes had finally returned with a modicum of vision.

Her future looked back, wide-eyed and panic-stricken. Their teeth chattered, like all those days ago on the unforgiving stone that had become her new bed. Their arms wrapped around themselves tightly, painfully, pulling their coat taut.

"Subaru?" It gave her pause - he looked to be in pain. Just like those days ago, in the mansion, weeping bitter tears into her lap from some unknown, unforgiving despair.

She wouldn't permit it. Despair ought to leave both of them alone.

Just for the moment, at least.

Please.

Her knight had begun trembling. Or it might have been herself. No matter.

Emilia dove forward, heedless and stupid and well-intentioned. She'd learned from the best.

Her arms wrapped around his figure, pulling herself forward into his warmth. The tremors stopped.

Subaru smelled of dust and sweat and smoke. Busy indeed.

"You don't have to say it back." She promised. He needn't anymore.. He'd said it dozens of times, show it dozens more. Ever the child, she'd responded to the confusing words the only way children did - ignorance and irritation. That was then and this was now. "You've said it enough for both of us. Let me do it now, okay?"

"O...Okay..." He murmured back, words prickling her ear.

His arms hung limply at his side. Rather than where they belonged, laced around her shoulders, returning the hug. The cold room chilled her back distantly.

It bothered her more than she cared to admit. So she didn't. Wouldn't.

One of them had started shaking. His knees rocked, bumping sharply against her own. Or it could have been hers - it was so hard to tell now.

Emilia pulled back, after some deliberation. She'd rested her arms on his shoulders, gently coaxing him down to rest. The floor remained welcoming as ever.

"You must be tired."

"Y-Yeah..."

She giggled at his bravado. "Don't be silly. It's okay to be tired. We talked about this, right?"

"R-Right..." He returned, still hesitant to be seen like this. It was adorable as always.

"You don't have to be so strong all the time..." She huffed, cheeks curdling into a gaunt, playful pout. "I'd rather see this side of you a bit more."

Subaru's breathing quieted and evened, and his eyes drooped to the floor, forlorn in the most familiar of ways.

She cupped his chin, tilting it up to meet her eyes, and smiled with the warmth she could gather.

"But you wouldn't want anything to do with this pathetic self of mine if you saw that." He apologized infuriatingly - there was nothing to apologize for, blast it!

"But I do. I do." Emilia insisted, disliking how he pulled back from her gaze. She wouldn't bite, never had, so stop acting like she would! "Like that bedridden girl in the mansion. I doubt you'd show your worst side to someone precious enough to speak with every night."

"Y-You know about that?" He asked, wounded. It stung to see him look at her like that. Like she was a trespasser - and that she truly had been, for that disgraceful evening.

"Not... intentionally. I didn't mean to pry, but I heard your voice coming from those quarters one night. I couldn't help it for a moment. I felt so ashamed of myself for eavesdropping - thank goodness Puck was there to give me a stern talking to that night about my indecorous behavior."

Subaru paused in thought, lost and perhaps a bit delirious from whatever he'd been through. Then he stopped, the uncomfortably complicated expression melting off his face. It morphed into a weak smile, chorused by a snort of

laughter. " 'Stern talking to'? Indecorous?"

"Those are real terms!" She argued indignantly, impeccable grace giving way to petulant humor as she lazily slapped a hand against his arm. "Real words! I know words!"

"Yeah, you do." He chuckled, continuing weakly. "All of them - even the ones older than old man Will, and he's about as ancient as the White Whales!"

"No I do not. And no he is not."

"You sure about that?"

"Most certainly!"

And they shared a laugh. It rocked past the creeping exhaustion suffusing the room, and the buried betrayal she'd selfishly maintained at his absence, despite her own promises to the contrary. Past the need for closure neither would receive for a good while. Past Sanctuary's sordid, decaying state.

Subaru stopped first. "Her name is Rem."

"Hm?" She interjected politely.

"Her name is Rem. That girl."

"Of course. I didn't forget it." Just because she occasionally had the comprehension of a child didn't mean she had the memory of one too.

His eyes had shifted and sunk from dim walls to floor. They'd turned glassy and haunted and stared deep beneath the stone. "She's dead."

She offered her hand, resting on his pliant cheek. Her cherished knight leaned into the gesture, face melding shallowly into her palm.

"All.... all of them are. All of them at the mansion are.... Emilia, they're all..." He repeated and repeated and repeated, voice a relentless, haunted wisp.

"Oh."

It was a little thing. It came in her little voice, as the rest of the half elf plunged into her own thoughts.

Everyone... that means Frederica, Petra, and Beatrice, would it not?

"Y-Yes." Subaru near bawled in response, startling the half elf. She must have spoken her musings aloud.

Frederica was... there wasn't much to know. She was a good maid, who provided good service, and seemed to be kind enough. Petra was a child, precocious and dainty and sweet. Beatrice was distant and such a rare sight, always locked in the library Emilia could never quite stumble into with the same frequency as he did.

There wasn't much to revelation. It settled like a stone in her heart - weighted and dragging, but impersonal and abrupt. Three lives lost... lives she'd spent time in, time with. All settled like an afterthought, because she was needed more than she needed to mourn.

"Subaru. Please... feel safe here with me." She implored, hoping the blurry gaze returned was one of acceptance. "It's selfish of me, but can you try?"

A muted mumble she'd taken for agreement sounded, and the boy offered no resistance as she guided him to rest his head on her shoulder. Spiked strands of errant hair nuzzled her own, falling just short of tickling her with every heaving breath Subaru took. Her hand grazed the back of his jacket, kneading with her wrist to coax some semblance of comfort into his moment of despondence. The wracks and shudders intensified for a moment before dying down ignominiously.

"You're tired, aren't you?"

The heavy head dug into her shoulder just a bit deeper. She could feel the tethered fabric across his face - rustling against the top of her sleeve.

"It's okay. That's alright." She cooed, slowly wrapping her limp arm around him. Emilia's fingers clasped the rough counters of his jacket, now disheveled by despair, and failed to smooth them over. "You've did your best. I'm sure of it - you'd never do anything less than that. Never ever. Never ever."

More stifled blubbering, muffled into her shoulder. The vibrations rocked up her arm with painful clarity.

"But it hurts to see you like this. I don't like seeing you hurting, Subaru."

Was it a half-lie? She couldn't see it yet, truly - a selfish part of her was grateful for the small mercy. Emilia had seen his despair once, and it had been heavy then. Simply shattered confidence giving way to wretched, alien dejection that curdled his handsome features. And it had been far easier then, in her own ignorance.

He'd been hurt because of her. Constantly, and she'd never batted an eye for she'd never spared a glance. Perhaps that's all it would have taken before...

Before they'd ever reached this point. The fault lay squarely upon her. As did the responsibilities.

To reach through the haze. Provide a reprieve. Or at least grant his pain the audience it deserved - the one that wrought it all for selfish ambitions.

Starting with her own.

It wasn't healing magic. It wasn't anything miraculous. Miracles didn't make people's head spin from twisted vision, nor did it rattle and burrow in their mind like so many voracious worms feasting on the dead. But Emilia forced herself to see through it all irregardless, grasping his shoulders to push him away to see and understand.

The faded world honed itself so sharply it was cutting, and the sight a handful of days ago met a match that never should have been.

It was worse. Far, far worse than she'd imagined it to be. Dark splotches speckled the side of his gaunt cheek - the left one, she remembered. Her right.

She guided a nail through the marred side. Her finger came off like paint, hued red between the curvatures in her fingers, the scent of filthy iron wafting up her nose.

Emilia found herself paralyzed, warmth trickling down her eyes. Blinding yet again.

"You're hurt." She mumbled, tears running at the corners of her mouth. "Subaru, you're hurt."

"Yeah, sorry I didn't tell you earlier." He tried playing it off with a laugh, though it gave way quickly. "I got it for... trying my best."

"You're hurt." It came accusingly, but not for him.

"Just a scratch. Don't worry about me - I've got this as always."

Another lie in her favor. "Let me help you."

"No, really. I don't need it."

"You could get an infection."

"That's fine."

"It's not!"

He'd... he'd die of it, wouldn't he? No one who would heal him knew useful magic for that, and it didn't matter how much strength they poured into him if he started rotting while he breathed. "It's not fine. Please, can I see it?"

"Emilia, I promise it's nothing serious."

"Liar."

Disquiet seeped into the room.

"Liar." She repeated. "Why would you be trying to hide something that isn't serious."

"No point in having you worry. It's going to be okay."

"But I'm worried sick! And you can't just tell me not to - that's not fair!"

"It's not." He admitted, pointedly looking away. "It's not."

"So why!? Please, I love you." He winced at the phrase. It stung deeply, but he had every right to feel that way. "I don't like seeing the people I love trying to be strong when they don't have to. I'm here. Please. Let me try to... let me try to help."

"You can't." He insisted, hands folding protectively over the bindings on his head.

"You don't know that. I can't bear to... to..." Emilia's thoughts staggered.

The black cloth rested away, wrapped around a solitary palm curled into a fist. A gouged socket, split into scabbed over seams and leaking blood like teardrops. The beautiful brown eye that rested there gone entirely, torn out judging from the shriveled strip of flesh resting inside. "There's nothing to be done. There's nothing I could do. Or Beako. Or Frederica. Or... Petra. You don't need this from me, please. I don't want to add to your pain any more than I already have."

What pain? The argument they had, so distantly long ago it felt like decades? How did he hurt her?

Emilia wouldn't dare say the same.

Not just the torn eye. His disembowelment. The beatings. The accusations of treason. The guilt. The exertion. The exhaustion. The blue-haired girl sleeping her life away. The dozens upon dozens lost to the White Whale without even a token to their stolen existence. All the corpses and pain and tarnished souls to put a selfish king on a lonely throne to save... she couldn't even remember. How could she face her knight, who'd given so much for a hidden cause even she couldn't even remember...

It wasn't worth it. It never had been. Why had it taken so long to realize that?

"It must have opened up after I cried like a kid." He joked, trying to brighten the mood. It sputtered off in smothering discomfort.

He was a child. Younger than her, certainly. Forced to endure the world and responsibilities she levied onto him in ignorance.

"You cried as anyone would have." She promised, her own tone pained and cracking before shifting into an unconvincing smile. "See? Nothing to be ashamed of."

"I guess not, but it's still embarrassing to cry in front of you."

"You shouldn't have to cry."

"What?"

"You shouldn't have to cry. Children shouldn't have to cry over getting stabbed... o-or losing an eye... or working themselves to tears."

"We've been over this. I'm not a child, remember?"

"But you could be. You're too young to go through all this." Even grown adults would have yielded from the sheer, relentless strain of it all. Just what had she forced him into? "No, even old people should never go through anything you have. No one should ever have to. But there's so many people hurting... or worse... because of me."

"What?"

"The villagers. Frederica. Petra. Rem. Crusch. The dead from the White Whale."

"Crusch and Rem getting hurt wasn't your fault!"

"But the rest?"

A beat. Hesitation, split-second, but it was there and it was deafening. "Not yours either. If anything, the dead from the White Whale are my fault!"

"No, that's not true. They were only fighting then because you convinced the other camps, and you only convinced the other camps to help me."

"Then it was still my choice!"

"But you were acting for me. For my selfish interests." It was sobering to realize. She'd never been anything less than a child, after all the time that passed. And like before, people still suffered for it. "If I'd never tried to become king, they wouldn't have died."

"Or they'd have died fighting something else, or losing! They killed a menace that haunted people for centuries."

"But they're dead and forgotten. Gone. Like that girl sleeping in the mansion."

Subaru choked.

"If you could go back, would you do it differently, Subaru?"

"I-I would." His face clenched. More bloodied tears streaked across. Emilia gently dabbed at them with the long sleeve of her dress.

"You'd never have needed to do it differently if I never forced you to begin with."

"You never forced me to do anything, Emilia."

"But you're in pain, and it's because of things I did. Or things I wanted. And it's my fault you're hurting. And it's not just you hurting from them, and you matter to me, Subaru. And I don't like how much pain I've been causing everyone. And it's time for it all to stop, even if it's too far to save the people that shouldn't have been hurt."

"Stop?"

"Yes." The thought of giving it all up didn't sit right with her entirely, but the reprieve was more than merely temptation. She'd never needed a crown before, and the half elf had long been nearing a point where the sins she'd enabled weighed heavier than any ambitions she had. "I don't need a crown. I don't need a kingdom. Or anyone else but you."

It felt undeserved until now, after all the blood spilled for her dreams. She'd need lifetimes to atone, but this might be a start. "Can we... leave this all in the past? Everything and everyone else? Just go somewhere in the snow, live our lives? I can't bear the thought of burying anyone else."

It was the absolute pinnacle of selfishness, but it would be better for everyone else's sake too. No more camps or elections or sponsorships or assassins. Just the discrimination she'd long acclimatized to for sharing a witch's visage - no different from the dark, suspicious hair on his head marking her knight as a dangerous foreigner.

But why did he regard her so strangely? He glanced and glanced like she'd changed into someone else entirely before his very eye.

"I wasn't sure at first, and it really scared me, but this can't be real. The Emilia I know wouldn't give up on her dreams."

She wouldn't.

"The Emilia you know was selfish. So very, very selfish."

"No, that can't be right. She was always so serious about helping the kingdom, even when the odds were against her and everyone else looked down on her for things she couldn't control."

"Maybe she's gone now. Or she never was." The half elf argued. "Or she gave up because she was tired of how her selfish wants hurt the people around her."

"No, the kingdom needs you. We've seen Sanctuary, and if there any other places like this they don't deserve to stay standing!"

"But... But here I am, trapped as the rest of them are. What good would I be helping anyone when I can't even help myself?"

"You have me."

"And you're in pain!" She yelled, the dam bursting along with her composure. "You're always there, but you're always in so much pain because of me, and you never say a thing. And it scares me so, so much every time you say you're okay when I know you're lying and you don't stop saying you're okay even when it means nothing anymore!"

Her knight fell into a silent stupor. Emilia continued.

"And for everything you say about loving me you've never shown you trusted me. You've just continued on trying to do things the way you do, and it works so well I end up depending on you even more, and it ends up hurting you so much more! You don't want me to suffer with you, but don't you see I do it anyway, but I do it alone and I hate doing it alone!"

The half elf took a shuddered breath.

"But you trust the sleeping girl with blue hair so much more. You talk to her with your real voice, and your real thoughts, and never anything less than that while you lie to my face about how okay you always are! Do you know how hopeless that makes me feel - that even you don't trust me!?"

Stunned silence. Emilia continued ruthlessly.

"But you're just telling me to continue with the dreams that hurt everyone. Don't you trust me?"

"I-I-"

"Can't you trust me when I say I love you, finally?"

"..."

"So can't you trust me when I say I've had enough?"

"But-But...But..."

"The dead are in the past now. As much as thinking about them makes me sad, they don't matter anymore."

"..."

"Because as long as I have you, everything will be okay. I love you."

"..."

"Subaru?"

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Her knight froze over, arms resting and eyes staring and far too composed for his own good. A hand drifted onto his gut as if he'd been struck, clutching at his torso so tightly it looked painful. A distant moan more akin to bleating escaped from his lips, cutting out intermittently.

Subaru's teeth chattered. It couldn't have been from the cold.

It reminded the half elf of that lonesome, distant evening in the mansion. Minus the suit and the happier times, of course. The same catatonic weariness.

That made it much easier to do what she needed to. Her hands moved of their own accord, tugging her knight onto her lap. He still trembled - she could feel it past her gloves - but he was moving with her guiding motions. Scruffy hair poked into her leggings, and a brown eye stared up into the ceiling rather than meet her own gaze.

"You're tired, aren't you?"

Another groan. Such a pitiful sound.

She ran a finger against his forehead, where the cloth didn't cover.

"That's okay. I'm tired too."

Her other hand laced his own, squeezing gently. He didn't squeeze back, but it mattered little.

"Rest with me, Subaru."

And he did.

<- ->

The time passed too quickly, and nothing seemed to change.

Save for his regard of her. A look of betrayal, for the lot of reasons she'd given him to think that way.

The half elf smiled past the coasting feeling of loss. He'd worried about her enough. It would be selfish to bring such petty concerns to their attention.

"I..." He began, voice ragged and croaking.

"Yes?"

"I had no idea." He confessed, bothered.

"That's okay." She promised. "I'd never said anything then. It's not your fault you didn't know."

"But I shouldn't have."

"Please don't blame yourself, Subaru. Just stay with me, okay? Promise me you'll stay with me."

"Okay."

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"Liar."

"But I have to."

"Liar!"

After everything, all the heartbreak and exhaustion and mutilation, he was just leaving again?!

"Please, Emilia. I need to talk to them."

"But I'm here. What's wrong with me?"

"Nothing is." He lied - it was disgusting how much she'd noticed it on this day alone, how often he really did lie.

"Liar!"

"I need to talk to them. They're your friends too, right?"

"But they don't matter anymore!" Emilia yelled, catching herself troubled by her own disregard. A judgmental eye fell on her, abruptly fading into something softer but not before the damage had been dealt. The half elf had never been so openly entitled before, and the discrepancy dawned on even herself. "And you're hurt. If something happened to you again I... don't think I could bear it."

"Emilia, you're much stronger than that. You don't need someone as pathetic as myself, and I'm sure you could bear it easily. What am I compared to a kingdom?"

"But I do! I know what I need and I know what I want! And I want you safe and I can't trust you to care for yourself."

"Emilia, I know you think I'm a child, but children go around scrapping their knees. I don't go around intending to get my eye gouged out."

It came so casually, distantly. Like it barely registered - how could her knight sound so unbothered by his own mutilation!?

"But it happened! And you keep throwing yourself at problems and getting hurt in bad ways! When you nearly got cut in half by the Bowel Hunter, and you just starting smiling. Do you know his scary that was for us?!"

"..."

"Subaru?"

"S-Sorry..." He mumbled an apology, though she could feel the fear radiating from him at the mention. "She was the one that did this to me..."

It was definitely some sort of cue, and emotionally ignorant as she might have been Emilia moved to a hug immediately.

"And it wouldn't be just her. Even the kindest people have hurt you, and I don't think you should bear it." Julius' beating resounded, the dull thwacks of a blunted blade on bruised flesh hauntingly painful a memory. "You've no reason to anymore."

"But I do. I need to know."

She wrapped her arms tighter, which didn't make much difference beyond making a statement. "No you don't. I won't allow it."

Her knight moved to a better stance, struggling with his footing from the awkward position she'd cradled him into.

"You wouldn't throw me off, Subaru. I know you woul- ah!"

He'd finally stood up, yanking the poor girl off the ground when she refused to let go.

"I would never hurt you like that. I'll just carry you along with me. It's up to you if you want people to see us like that."

In jest, certainly. The coy smile tugged up a fraction and nothing more. Nothing but a plea not stop her from prying. From latching on like a desperate parasite.

Emilia released her hold, flopping ungraciously to the ground. The back of her head struck stone and bounced with a sickening crack.

"Emilia!"

Her vision swamp with spots interposed with a bound face half-filled with frantic concern, the other side hidden under fabric. She could feel fingers tracing under her hair, along with the relief on his features when the hand came back unslicked by blood. Arms embraced her still form, and a heartbeat thrummed distantly against her body.

"You're okay, you're okay, you're okay..." He half-assured, half-pleaded to someone. She wasn't entirely certain who.

"I've been nothing short of loathsome to you. To take so much and continue taking your concern. I'm truly the worst kind of being."

"No, that's not true."

"Here you are comforting me yet again, after all the pain you never needed to deal with. After losing an eye to that... witch."

"Always."

"And I can't even allow myself to trust you as well, even when you've come back every time you said you would."

"You were worried about me. Thank you for that, Emilia."

"I just... I can't bear to see you in pain. Not anymore. And if you go, you might..."

Die.

"-get hurt or worse!"

"I'm just going to talk to Roswaal about something in the mansion. Nothing dangerous. I promise I'll be back soon enough. Unharmed."

"A-And I just can't trust that. I can't trust it when you say that anymore!"

"..."

"But I can't trust myself to know any better."

"..."

"You've always come back. Please... do what you must. Ask Garf if he can do anything about your eye - he's a capable healer." Emilia said, turning away from him painfully. Back to the chilling cold and snow, where her head throbbed and ached from the cold and confusion. "I'd hate for you to get an infection, and I can handle myself well enough."

She had to.

"I'm sorry, Emilia. I couldn't warn you the last time I left, when I should have made sure the letter got to you. I made the mistake of making a promise you never got to hear, and it hurts to think about badly I must have betrayed your trust."

"You didn't..." She mumbled before trailing off, uncertain if he truly hadn't, with the twisted, entitled way she'd found herself in so often recently.

"But I could have tried harder. Or smarter. And if I had you wouldn't be so affected by all of this."

The half elf couldn't bring herself to dispute the possibility.

"So please, let me do it right this time." His voice sounded closer now. "Let me try again."

Fabric fell on Emilia's shoulders, startling her. It had to be his cherished coat - the sleeves were far too wide to be anything else.

It was a keepsake of his own. Like the pendant Puck slept in. A holdover from simpler times - times before they'd even met.

It was a home and a heartbeat, and Subaru was giving it to her of his own volition.

She could hear his footsteps padding away, echoes dampening into nothingness.

"I'll be back for this, and you, soon enough. Just hold on, Emilia."

And she would.

He'd promised, after all.

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Subaru would be quick about it. Probably. It was but a conversation, after all. Just to report what happened in the mansion. Have some aid administered to the wound the evil woman left him. Maybe an hour or two. It was nearing night already, with the same sweeping chills crossing the world like it had the first day.

It wouldn't make a difference if she'd failed. He'd still wait for her, trapped and helpless. As if sharing suffering made it better for anyone.

Which lead to another trial in the snowbound world. Facing an imagined past she'd long since forgotten.

More frozen bodies and wounding hail, howling winds scoring her underdressed figure. Too many cycles she'd simply surrendered, resting her head on the numbing ice of a statue and waiting for the snow to bury them all.

No more.

Life after this, with her beloved (and it was just a bit embarrassing to think about!), would only come with success.

And success came only with bravery. She'd make her own if the little left in her system would not suffice.

And trudged, waist-deep in thick snow as the world threatened to bury her for the nth time.

Let it try.

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The cold had long since stopped bothering her, but her extremities were a different matter. She'd been among villagers before, a good while back. Trading where the unceasing winter made the face she wore a bit less relevant to the people she'd bartered with. Offering aid to the ones numbed by exposure, nursing frigid fingers and angry red ears for some of the careless residents.

They'd refused her often enough, but the occasional youth was willing to accept her assistance. The innocents, still too young to know why the world feared her. They'd grown afraid, inevitably, but for the brief moment of ignorance she'd indulged in the company of someone other than Puck.

Now there was nothing to nurse with. No warm water or extra fabric to bind the hardening flesh of her hands - both of them would freeze over quickly enough in the white frost of the trial. The half elf rolled her fingers gently, carefully ignoring the temptation to curl them into fists for fear of being unable to unfurl them again, tucking them back the sides of her body and continuing towards the sparkling light piercing the sky.

There was nothing to fear, really. She'd died in this world often enough to know nothing carried over from the dream.

Emilia could afford to explore, if every step mapping the land was one closer to ending the trial.

Even if every step made her yearn to collapse from exertion. Especially then.

<- ->

She'd lost count yet again. It seemed the world dragged her back every single time she could almost lay eyes on the beacon in the frost.

Infuriating, to say the least.

It blurred, always, on the cusp of near-success. Taunting. Spiteful, almost.

It didn't matter how many times she'd take it, nor how much the constant shift in lighting made her head throb in pain.

The only trial that mattered would be the last one, and there would certainly be a last one. One way or another.

<- ->

It had come distractingly, despite her keen focus.

The smell of cooking meat. It wafted in the air enticingly.

It wasn't entirely pleasant - traces of charcoal and spoiled eggs joined the aromatic tempest - but her famished self couldn't disregard the temptation. The odor was delicious, and it simply grew stronger with time. Mouthwatering after not eating anything for so long.

Subaru was probably planning something nice. He was probably the one that talked everyone into cooking. The half elf giggled at the conversation he must have had to rope Ram into the endeavor.

She'd join them for the meal afterwards, then. Her work had yet to be finished.

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Footsteps. Not from her own pacing.

"Subaru?"

She stared at the sound, eyes unfocused. The same mop of hair...

"It is you, Subaru!"

Emilia skipped to him playfully, stopping when her hand brushed against the side of his shirt.

"Gosh, where have you been?" She gripped his own. It was damp and sticky.

Did her knight trip in the snow or something? How clumsy of him!

"I was so worried."

Still silent. Emilia had a feeling...

She leaned forward. "Are you exhausted?"

A slow blink. She giggled. Gosh, he must have been so tired already if he couldn't even say it out loud!

"I see! All right, then."

She knew just the trick.

The half elf skipped back, resting her knees on the stone floor again. It wasn't as pleasant as it was in the mansion - the uneven stone dug into her leggings - but she could deal with a bit of discomfort for his sake. Emilia tapped her thighs imploringly.

"You like resting your head on my lap, right?"

Wordlessly, her knight lowered his head to rest.

"Subaru, are you sleepy?"

A wilted gurgle came to follow.

"Don't force it."

More silence. But it was the comfortable kind this time.

"You're always pushing yourself too hard for other people's sake."

She chastised gently. No point making getting mad at him, when he was so painfully tired already.

"It gives me mixed feelings." Emilia explained. "I only want you to push yourself too hard for me."

It was disgusting to admit, but he deserved the truth. And she'd never wanted him pushing himself to lead to the things he's had to deal with.

Just a bit of exhaustion. Maybe worrying about what best to do. Nothing so horrid as even a fraction of what he'd seen.

"But I wouldn't like a Subaru who never looked at anyone else." It just wouldn't be him anymore. "I'm sorry. I'm so selfish, aren't I?"

"Uh?"

"Hm?"

Emilia bent down, tilting her head to reach near his own. His lips were damp and metallic - he must have cut them when he fell.

So clumsy as always... she giggled into his mouth before pulling back gently.

"It's still a bit embarrassing for me when I do that." She apologized, touching a hand to her lips. Still warm, and the half elf could feel a flush settling on the rest of her face. "You're so light this time. Are you on a new diet or something?"

"..."

"I bet even I could carry you on my back this time!" She continued rambling, before catching herself in stunned recognition.

"Oh, silly me! Gosh, I forgot how tired you were. Don't worry. Just please, get some rest." Emilia apologized, hand brushing the slicked bangs on his damp forehead. The other settled on lacing fingers with his own, and it didn't fit quite right - damp and sticky and sharp in places it shouldn't have been. She gave a soft squeeze, which her knight weakly reciprocated for the first time tonight.

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Her vision returned, but things remained off. Whenever she stared at her knight, the world just shifted out of focus. Like it had been painted over in ominously dark red and bone-white shades. It felt magical and rather inconvenient - she just wanted to see his face again!

<- ->

Puck was back! It had to be!

He wandered in wordlessly, slipping past the big stone doorway. He wasn't flying this time, and there weren't any jokes, but who else could it have been?!

The same snowy fur, minus the grey. It must have come off from the weather. The same eyes, red-rimmed. Well, maybe not the same but he could have been having a hard time like they were too! He started hopping around, probably bored from flying all the time. Which was fair - even Roswaal took walks in the woods. Minus now, of course.

"Puck!"

She greeted, ecstatic. Emilia waved him over, trying her best not to wake the sleeping boy on her lap. Puck started sniffing the air curiously - rude! She wasn't that unrecognizable! Maybe a bit thinner, but certainly not enough to warrant that!

Puck wandered back towards them, with a lot of tentative steps and curious sniffing. She raised his pendant - his home - to hopefully remind him of who she was.

Puck seemed to, hopping along towards her. She spread her arms eagerly to catch the inevitable hug-

Before a hand shot up, grabbing her friend out of the air and slamming him onto stone. Gruesome squelching and an abrupt crunch echoed in the tiny, tiny room.

And again. And again.

"Why?! Why!?" She yelled at her knight, hot tears gathering in the corners of her eyes. Her fingers curled around his shoulders, shaking furiously.

Puck lay mangled by his side, skull split and crushed. Blood leaked and dyed his beautiful fur red.

WhyWhyWhyWhyWhy

"Not..." He protested weakly.

"Why would you hurt him?!"

He groaned the next word incomprehensibly.

"How could you even bear hurting him like that. With your own two hands..." She raised the offending limb for emphasis, before the veil tore itself apart.

It was a gruesome sight, missing digits and shards of protruding bones. It still leaked blood. Chunks of flesh were gone from parts of his body, or hanging on by slivers of muscle. A knee was gored to the bone, and his right foot was missing more toes than it had left. The flesh on his left arm was flayed, exposing gruesome red sinew.

"S-Subaru?" She muttered mutely. "S-Subaru?"

"Not... Puck..." Her beloved knight whispered. Subaru's blood trickled from his lip, dribbling down his neck. It stained

so many, many things that night.

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"I told you I could carry you all by myself!" The half elf boasted, bending a bit forwards for balance. He'd lost a good bit of weight, and a few minutes sleep made a world of a difference no matter how tired you find yourself to be. Subaru leaned a bit, but remained adamant on not holding onto her shoulders for balance. Ever the gentleman, but it was so inconvenient when she wanted to show off!

"Come on, Subaru. Say something." She said half-jokingly, before resigning himself again to silence. So stubborn... or just tired. "Sleepyhead."

Going from the temple to their rooms wasn't that far. Sure it would be a bit tough, but Emilia was much stronger than she looked. And he could rest up all he wanted for now.

They'd talk about it tomorrow, hopefully. And he'd joke about her seeing him in a moment of weakness, and she'd be annoyed and criticize him for that, and they'd laugh about it like it was a dear memory they hadn't made yet.

"Alright, get some rest. I love you." The words were... still not quite natural to say. It wasn't humiliating per se - there were worse things to love, and definitely worse people - but there was a degree of mortification, saying such... well... embarrassing things out loud! Frederica wouldn't let her hear the end of it, geez!

<- ->

Smoke contoured the distance, where a church used to be. It must have been where they'd been cooking earlier - the vaguely delicious smell still lingered, tantalizing. Emilia ignored it. Subaru needed rest and care and so many other things she couldn't provide in the snow.

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"Subaru, look!" She exclaimed, to little effect. The lethargic boy remained unmoving on her back. "Gosh, you're no fun!"

It was fine. He'd wake up soon enough, and she'd just tell him about everything he missed. It wouldn't be a problem - she liked talking to him.

"I didn't know Puck had siblings!"

And so many of them too! Maybe hundreds of them, just staring back. Emilia waved at the congregation of cuteness with her free hand.

"Hellooooo!"

And moved to meet them with slow steps. They all shifted towards her, hopping along happily to greet them back.

It wouldn't be long now.